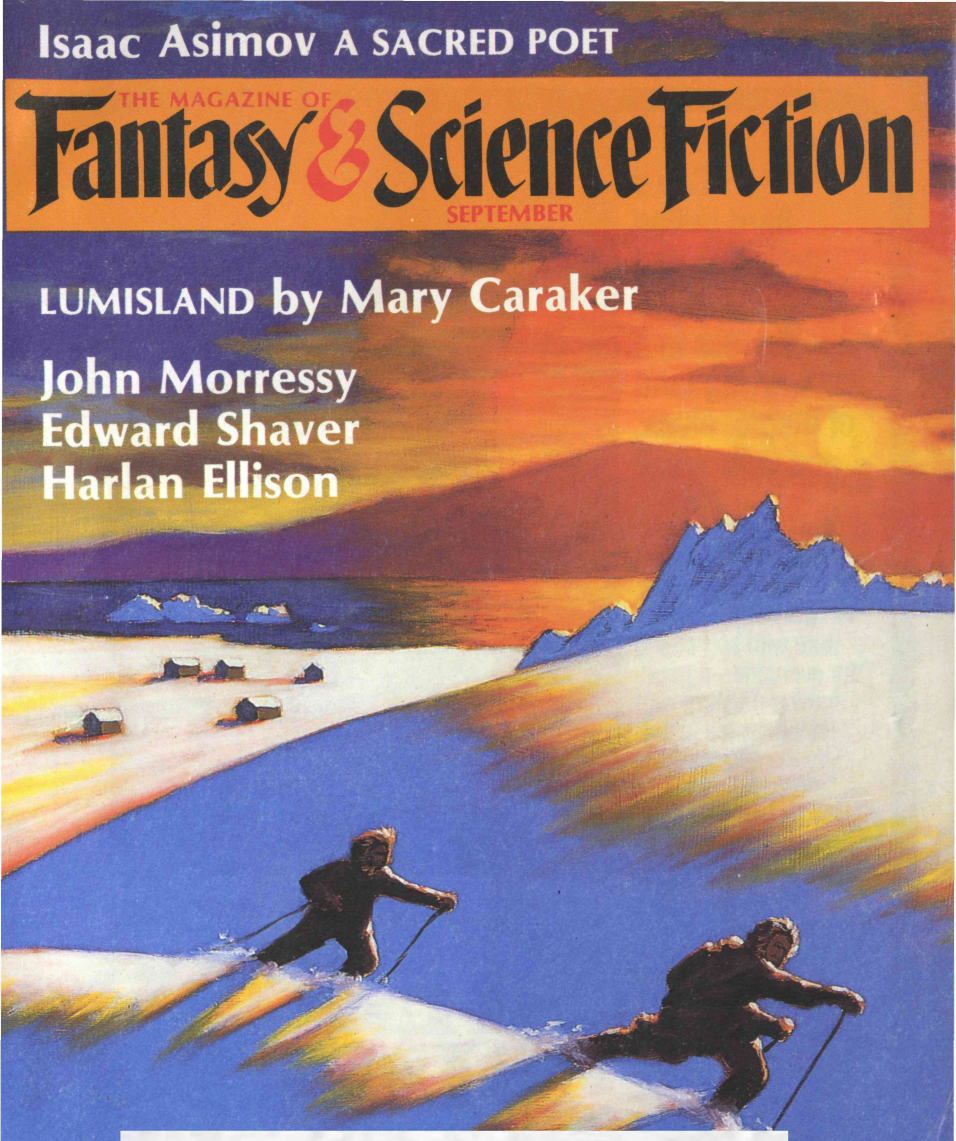
Isaac Asimov A SACRED POET

THE MAGAZINE OF Fantasy & Science Fiction

SEPTEMBER

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John Morressy
Edward Shaver
Harlan Ellison



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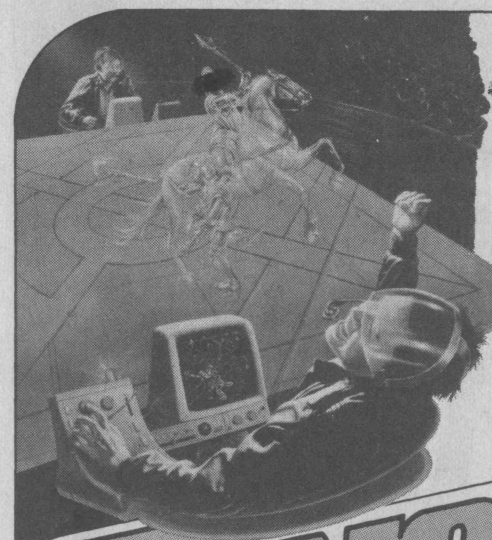
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This powerful and inventive tale about a warrior of the future on the run is Ronald Anthony Cross's first for F&SF. His work has appeared in Universe 16 *("Hotel Mind Slaves"), and he writes that he lives in Santa Monica with his wife Barbara and son Gideon Kane. "I don't identify with any movement in literature (new wave or cyberpunk) but consider myself a genuine outsider, heart and soul . . ."*

Shiva Shiva

BY

RONALD ANTHONY CROSS

I

One moment it was just life, just running: the hot sun pounding down on us in pulselike waves; and the dry red dirt kicking up clouds behind us; and us, the Running Dogs, doing what we do. Just the running, the living heat, the dust — then —

They fell on us from out of the sky, and it was all over for the Running Dogs before it began. It wasn't until later that I figured out what had happened. They had all gotten together: the Screaming Eagles, of course — mostly it was they, but also their old enemies the Duck Hawks, and even some of the Coyotes: I saw them running out from the tunnel beneath the hill to join the fray, like the scavengers they are, once the Eagles and Duck Hawks had us down.

As usual, fortune conspired to save me as if I were the center of the universe, which I sometimes feel certain that I am. Several factors were working in my favor, if I could only maintain the presence of mind necessary to utilize them.

For one thing, I was knocked down right away and ignored while I lay out of the battle for a few crucial moments taking in the scene.

For another, they had let us get too close to the tunnel, in order to bring the Coyotes into the battle at the opportune moment. (I thought of this later; at the time, all I saw was the tunnel, close, and I so fast — fastest of the Running Dogs.)

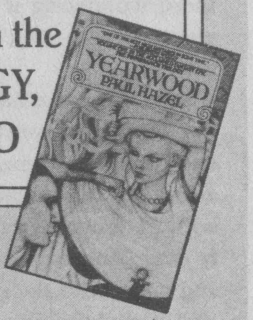
And then the third and most important ingredient: Goosebrains the Barbarian was still up and fighting, and doubtless would be for some time to come.

UNDERSEA

BY

PAUL HAZEL

The powerful second volume in the
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First thing they did was to take out Poke, and there he lay dead as the red dirt, but they were still pounding him with war clubs, which is the reward you get for always being the best at everything.

And so, as of now, the Running Dogs (what was left of us) were leaderless. How about me? I thought, wheeling and dealing even as I lay there wondering if any of us would even survive this devastating onslaught.

The enormous bulk of Goosebrains the Barbarian went down, covered with writhing, wing-flapping forms, and I saw the slender, sinewy man with the Coyote headdress run swiftly over, hopping across the bodies, and jump onto the pile.

Uh-oh, I thought, it's all over now. I closed my eyes. Play dead was the only thing I could think of left to do. Soon, I realized, I probably wouldn't even have to pretend. Would I?

But when I opened up my eyes just a notch, it was to see Goosebrains surge back up, bodies flying off of him in all directions, and one Coyote trying to run for it.

But nobody got away from Goosebrains. He pounced on the Coyote before he got his feet churning, and then turned and batted the birds down before they really got off the ground. A moment later and they were all dead. How could anyone so big and strong be so fast? Almost as fast as I. Maybe even faster, but not so quick, I told myself hopefully. Particularly when I was scrambling for my life.

There was a lull in the action. Goosebrains had scared everybody. He should have run for it then. He could have made the tunnel. Maybe. And not even a Coyote with rabies would go into a tunnel after our giant berserker.

Awesome! He had no intention of running for it. He smiled. He actually smiled! Blood all over him. Pile of corpses at his feet. He beckoned lovingly to the skies.

"Well, come on," he said in a low but clear voice. "You've got to roast the Goose before you start the party."

He was going down with the ship. Well, they didn't call him Goosebrains for nothing.

At a safe distance a few forms sailed down. Landed. Gathered. Glancing uneasily at the pile of corpses the Goose had created, at the slender, deadly club he kept swishing in the air. Once they got going, it would be the end even for Goosebrains, but for the moment it was a case of "Who goes first? Not me."

I jumped up and flashed by the startled Goose so fast that he didn't even have time to register who I was, and took a shot at me with the club and missed. I was scrambling for the tunnel. But I stopped and turned to shout, "Hold them off while I run for help."

Then something hit me from

above, and I was down again, struggling with a Hawk, when I caught sight of another form dropping out of the sky onto us.

Too late, it's all over, I thought, Suddenly, Duck Hawk's head exploded, raining red, and his body whipped away from mine, followed by Duck Hawk number two.

Goosebrains stood over me, club red, ferocious scowl.

"Go for it."

I went for it. A few scrambled seconds later and I was in the tunnel, running fast. And in the long run, I'm the fastest there is.

I had told Goosebrains I was running for help. But let's face it, who was I going to get to help us? And if I did get someone, even Goosebrains would be down by the time I got back with them. No, I was running for help, perhaps, but it was self-help.

I caught a couple of skulking shadows along the wall, and, grinning a bit myself, I stopped to dispatch the two unfortunate Coyotes. After all, I was scout and ambassador for the Running Dogs. Chief adviser to Poke the perfect, top dog (alas, dead dog now). And the Running Dogs were the best ever. No one would have dared to face us on their own, not the Screaming Eagles or the Duck Hawks, let alone the Coyotes.

The two Coyotes knew the odds were against them, and tried to slink off, but I made quick work of them, and continued on through the tunnel to the city.

II

The Outer La Circle is a jumble of shacks, tents, domes, wooden box huts, ruins of ancient dilapidated buildings, and just about every ramshackle, topsy-turvy, inventive, live-in thing you could imagine, all tossed together without rhyme or reason — city salad. The farther in you got, the more orderly and complex the arrangements became; colors matched; styles evolved.

The Inner Circle, Teck City, was all planes and angles, dazzling geometry. Or so it was in my memory. I had lived there as a child. My mother, a teck, still lived there. But I had flunked out early and been condemned to Outer La. No, not condemned so much as fit into place. I was never cut out to be a teck.

Even as a child, movement was the thing for me. I could never sit still and work on something; in fact, I could never even sit down. I had to be up on my feet and darting about, always into mischief. And so I had flunked out of the Teck City school, and bounced around the Outer La Circle, until I was old enough to join a club, the Desert Rats. From there I quickly hopped from the Rats to the Diamond Backs to the Running Dogs, where I belonged. Top dogs, until today.

And as for the La Circle Center, simply called by all of us La Heart, where the Brahmins live, I couldn't tell you. Oh, I've heard fanciful stories about it, too many! But no one I know has ever seen it, and the stories are conflicting and obviously composed of many of the same ingredients as fairy tales.

Still running, I penetrated Outer La, and soon had pierced to the colorful area called by the locals the Streets of Flames, before I even realized where I had been heading.

All the buildings were red here; most of them were taverns and whorehouses. This was my favorite part of town. How typical, I thought, that my feet should bring me here without my even noticing where I was going, at a time like this. How appropriate that I should mourn the destruction of the Running Dogs club in the same manner as I had celebrated their successes.

Soon I was in the Black Bull, quaffing ales, but in a dark, sullen manner, so that most everyone in the noisy joint avoided me, and no one included me much in their continual drunken gibing and bantering; in short, same as always. Alas, I am not, and never have been, Mr. Fun Fellow. I'll drink to that. I did.

So there I sat, all mournful and bombed on ale, and feeling bad about poor, dead Poke and all the rest of the Running Dogs, and wondering what the hell would I do now: soon as they got the celebrating over with, the Duck Hawks, the Screaming Eagles, and the Coyotes would probably all be out in full number scouring the city for me. Ironically enough, had our leader, Poke, survived instead of me, he probably would have been welcomed into any one of those clubs. A few years and he would have been leading it. A few more years and he would have transformed it into the top club in Outer La. Everybody loved Poke, even his enemies.

I, on the other hand, seemed to be universally mistrusted by all the clubs in the Outer Circle. Not only did nobody seem to understand me, including the Running Dogs, but *I* didn't even seem to understand me.

I'll drink to that. I did. The only Running Dog they would be less likely to let live than me was Goosebrains. Everybody was afraid of Goosebrains. And nobody but Poke the perfect would even have thought of trying to control him.

Well, let's see — I could try to run to another city. Maybe North San or South San. If I could get through no-man's-land alive, and then not get killed by the clubs guarding the outside turf — but then, I had no idea what either North San or South San was like. From what I had heard, each of the great cities was run on a totally different system from any other. How could I fit in there, when I couldn't even fit in anywhere here in La, where I was born and raised?

Then I saw luscious Lana, serving drinks. I beckoned her over to me.

"Where are the boys, Blackie?" She was obviously puzzled to see me in the tavern all alone, in the early afternoon.

"Can you get away for a few minutes, Lana? I've got something important to tell you," I said.

"So tell me. Where's Goosebrains?"

"Not here," I said. "Really, can you get loose? Let's go up to your room for a minute where I can talk without anyone hearing me."

Lana gave me a sly look. What was going on here? Lana, being Goosebrains the Barbarian's girl, couldn't believe I would make a move on her. In fact, no one in the world would move on the Goosebrains's girl. She couldn't believe it, but she looked interested.

Which didn't surprise me much. It has been my experience that while men seem to hate me because they can't understand me, women all seem to lust after me because they can't understand me.

Soon we were upstairs in Lana's room, mourning the fall of the Running Dogs in the most excruciating manner imaginable. At one point, when Lana cried out, the two of us thrashing on the bed, I imagined her cries to contain the anguish of loss as well as the ecstasy of release. Afterward she wept — tears of both joy and loss, I suppose.

Back down the stairs, arms around each other, we walked in silence. Both missing the Dogs, but at the same time happy to have found each other.

"I've got to get back to work," Lana had started to say, when she froze in mid-sentence, and her huge, dark eyes flashed wide open. In fear?

Suddenly I realized it was quiet in the Black Bull tavern. I tightened my arm around her shoulder protectively and followed her gaze — and everyone else's gaze, too, for that matter — to the giant, muscular, blood-splashed figure in the doorway. For a moment I didn't recognize him, then it dawned on me. "Oh my God," Lana gasped, "it's Goosebrains; he's alive. He's still alive."

I was trying surreptitiously to slip loose from her arm, which had unconsciously tightened its hold around my neck out of fear. Had he seen us? He gave no sign. He just stood there. Shaking.

I broke loose, spun, and sprinted for the back door, peripherally aware of Lana's body spinning and falling, and directly aware of Goosebrains's shouting out in rage something that could have been my name.

Then I heard him crashing through chairs and tables, trying to cut me off.

Did I say I was quicker than Goosebrains? He did cut me off; I twisted around, jumped up on a table, and tried to reverse toward the front door.

Goosebrains was hot on my heels, too hot. I gave up the door and cut to the side, and felt him blast past me so close that his hand grazed my shoulder and closed, but I squirmed loose, leaving a bit of skin behind as a souvenir.

Nowhere to go, when suddenly I saw a figure throw itself on him, clinging to his leg, giving me the moment I needed. Lana!

Then I had it. There had been a fight in the tavern two nights ago, breaking out the side window. Had they got it repaired yet? I sprinted across the floor, dodging through the maze of chairs and tables, and heard Goosebrains coming after me, charging straight through the obstacles like a bull smashing everything in its path.

Then I tossed myself through the window, which, as I discovered on the way through, had not, thank God, been repaired.

I hit the street, rolled and came up running, heard Goosebrains hit behind me.

But then I was in the street and running free, and I had a good start, and in the long run, nobody could catch me. Nobody.

III

But Goosebrains had made the excruciating effort everyone had learned to expect of him. And doing so, he must have driven us both over the edge into that eerie, seldom-reached consciousness the warrior caste calls the waking dream.

I came to, gliding in an effortless gait through some unfamiliar area of the city, thinking no thoughts; exhausted but somehow drawing energy from some limitless source. I felt as if I could have run the body on until it jarred itself apart and fell to pieces. As if it were someone else's body. I had vague, disjointed memories of the two of us racing up one street and down another, driving each other on and on.

I knew he must have collapsed, because he was no longer with me. Perhaps I had accomplished what the Screaming Eagles, Duck Hawks, and Coyotes had all failed to do: maybe I had run Goosebrains to death. But one thing I knew for sure: he wasn't raging hot on my heels, so he was down and out of it for now.

I slowed gradually, and then stopped. I was still half in the waking dream and half here. Wherever *here* was. I was lost. The weather had changed. It wasn't even sundown yet. (How that awful day dragged on and on.) But it was approaching night, and the weather had changed dramatically. A low, distant thunder was rumbling in the air.

An old man sat in the dust, cross-legged in front of a small sleeping tent, and waited for the rain.

I didn't have to see his arm, empty, without the caste bracelet clamped

on it, to read his caste: everything about him told me. Servant caste. Bottom of the barrel.

Suddenly fully feeling the exhaustion for the first time, I stumbled and almost fell down. Shaky legs. I sank down in the dirt street, across from the old man, who seemed not to have noticed me, and watched him. Not so much because I had any interest in his affairs, but because I was too tired to avert my gaze.

It started to rain, a few big, full drops. The old man stood up and cackled with glee, holding his hands up into the air.

In my dreamlike state of exhaustion, it seemed to me as if his arms thrust up and up until they rooted into the heavens, and with that weird thought, there came to me the vision of his feet seeping through the tattered shoes and rooting deeply in the earth. His face suffused with mindless joy, he seemed to hold the very heavens and earth in place. And, standing there stretched out into the pouring rain — because, yes, it was now all of a sudden coming down hard — he was not only receiving sustenance from the earth and the heavens, no, no, he was what was sustaining them. Just as he was issuing out of them, they were issuing out of him. Then I blinked, and something inside my head shifted onto a different plane, and he was just a crazy old man getting wet.

A large, clumsy oaf, well into his cups, staggered out of the tent, swearing and making threatening gestures with his pudgy fist, which the old man either ignored or didn't register in his rain ecstasy.

"I told you to stay away from here, you crazy old fool. You're bad luck. Now I'm going to beat you to where you won't be able to crawl for a week."

The old man sank down on his hands and knees in the mud. "Oh, forgive this unworthy servant," he whined. "It would degrade your feet to kick me. Oh noble merchant, have mercy on the lowest of the low. Et cetera, et cetera." I mean, he actually said, "Et cetera, et cetera," in a strange, dry, sarcastic tone of voice.

The fat, drunk merchant soiled his foot once. The old man howled, and tried to squirm across the muddy road like a cockroach, but the merchant apparently had decided to really make an effort of it, and, catching up with him, began dragging him back toward his tent, where he obviously intended to make a long, drawn-out attempt of what doubtlessly, in his drunken mind, passed for rehabilitation.

Wearily, I forced my aching body to its feet and painfully jogged over to them.

But by the time I got there, the merchant was beating and the old man was howling.

"Stop," I said. Nobody listened. I struck the merchant. "Stop," I said again.

Now he was down in the mud with the old man. Holding his jaw. And moaning. I held out my right fist, the bright red warrior caste bracelet gleaming on the wrist, hoping to discourage any further action.

Then the old man did a very strange thing. Scurrying over on his hands and knees, groveling before me in the mud, he importuned me: "Oh beneficent angel, protector of the poor and helpless, this worthless one, the lowest of the low, begs you, please, please do not hit him anymore."

"Let him beat you to death?" I was wearily amused.

He shrugged. "Whatever."

"He can't stay here in front of my house," the drunken lout muttered in a sullen tone of voice. Oh, he was merchant caste, all right. Even lying in the mud, stroking his swollen jaw, his eyes lit up with the protest of bargaining. "He degrades the neighborhood." He gestured at the potpourri of tents and ramshackle huts clustered in disorderly fashion around us. "Why do all these beggars hang around the gates all day long, anyway? It makes sense for a merchant to live here. I sometimes trade with the Inner City. I need to stay in touch. But him, what does he get out of it?"

I looked at the old man, who caught my eye and shrugged, as if to say, "What do I get out of it?" Then I looked up, for the first time registering the great wall that enclosed the Inner City. The gates? So this is where my feet had led me.

"He can't come round my tent," the merchant muttered insistently.

Suddenly I was overwhelmed with an inexplicable, senseless rage.

"All right, you drunken toad," I shouted. I charged into his tent and smashed my shoulder into the center support, breaking it loose. Then a red haze settled over me, and when I came out of it, I was marching down the muddy street, dragging an unbelievably awkward heavy bundle: the merchant's entire tent with most of his belongings still in it.

He, of course, was running along beside me, screaming, threatening, and begging me to stop, all at the same time.

But I struggled on, my heart pounding, dazed, and exhausted, until I got out onto the middle of the bridge that passed over one of the many rivers. This one was already swelling with the steady downpour of rain, moving fast.

Amidst the screams of the merchant, and the cheers of the crowd of onlookers we had collected, I made one last, immense effort and hoisted the bundle up and over the side. Laughing and gibing each other, the crowd swiftly dissipated, leaving the weeping merchant down on his knees, clinging to my leg; and the slender, solitary figure of the old man, watching, waiting, somehow alarmingly alert.

My demon left me. I passed my hand almost lovingly through the merchant's hair, comforting him.

"Now you have no house," I said tenderly, "and no longer have to burden yourself with worries about who sits in front of it."

I left him weeping on the bridge, and as I walked back toward the old man, he was watching me with eyes as wide as if he were a bird of prey, an owl perhaps, and I a mouse.

"Shiva," he whispered. Then he was down on his knees before me on the bridge in the rain, prostrating himself at my feet. Chanting, "Shiva Shiva," over and over in a strangely soft but passionate tone of voice.

"Get up," I said. He got up. I waved my hand at the wall. "Where exactly is the gate?"

"Down that street, to the large white building, then right."

"Why not?" I said to no one in particular.

"Why not, indeed?" the old man answered.

It had suddenly struck me that, as usual, my feet were right. With Goosebrains, the Screaming Eagles, the Duck Hawks, and the Coyotes all scouring the Outer City for me, this was my only option. To take the tests. To attempt to gain citizenship in Teck City, the Inner Circle. Why not, indeed? The tests were open to all. Like the homeless merchant weeping on the bridge, I had nothing left to lose.

Besides, even if I failed the test, which I probably would, perhaps I could drag it out for a few days. Maybe, during that time period, the Eagles and Duck Hawks would find Goosebrains and at least eliminate him from the picture for me, and doubtless he would take a few of them with him for company when he went.

"I wonder what sort of questions they will ask me?" I said out loud.

The old man shook his head, looking displeased. "That's the wrong question," he said. "The only important question is, What will you ask yourself?"

I left him on the bridge and started off toward the gates. Once, when I stopped and glanced back, I thought I saw his figure merged with that of the merchant, perhaps comforting him, whispering in his ear. But the distance was too great to be certain. Weird old man. Shiva Shiva! As I walked to the gates, he kept reverberating through my mind, as hard to grasp as an echo.

And under the preliminary questioning, when it seemed to me that they were showering questions on me from every direction at once, I remember standing up and saying in an almost angry tone of voice that these were all the wrong questions, and then shouting: "The only important question is, What will you ask yourself?"

In my dreamy state of conscious-

ness, it was almost as if it weren't I speaking, but the old man speaking through me. Through all of us, I thought. Somehow it made sense to me then, though it does not now.

After a puzzled conference, they removed my warrior caste bracelet and withdrew. At last I was alone, in a small room with a bed and a table with food on it. I did not eat. I slept.

The next day I was questioned by a different group. The questioners wore no caste bracelets, and this time were dressed in simple white tunics. These were strange people, but I couldn't put my finger on their strangeness. They had in common with each other a certain air of relaxed alertness. And if I may be so bold, they seemed to share a certain quality that I could recognize in myself, an almost humorous detachment from what they were doing. Yes, strangely enough, I no longer felt any fear or pressure. It all seemed so ridiculous to me — that if I answered wrong, I would be back outside, caught up in a chain of violence that stretched on forever before me and behind me — that I couldn't really believe it. How had I got caught up in it? Why? These were the questions running through my mind, often obscuring the questions I was supposed to be answering, so that again and again I had to ask them to repeat the questions. And then sometimes I would find myself bursting with helpless laughter at the meaninglessness of what they were asking me.

"Is this how we've set up our society?" I laughed uncontrollably. "All the wrong questions? Whoever can answer all the wrong questions wins all the wrong prizes?"

I woke up the next morning aware of two shadowy figures waiting in my room. A bracelet was on my wrist. A good bracelet, oh my God, a gold bracelet! I was stunned stunned stunned, blasted out of my mind with astonishment at the realization. I had not passed the test as a teck; I had passed as — I was now a Brahmin, the holy priest ruler caste. I was going to the Center of La. The Heart.

Two slender men in white robes arose and bowed toward me. "Greetings and salutations, from the true Self in us, to the true Self in you. May all living beings awaken infinitely into that Self. Come. Dress. Eat. Replenish the body. These forms must journey far today. We are here to take you to your home in the Heart of La."

IV

Being a Brahmin might be ecstasy, all right, but it was no fun. Fun! — Do you want to know Zaca's idea of fun? (Zaca had been appointed my guide for an indeterminate break-in period, until I felt I no longer needed him.) Zaca liked to sit in his totally empty room, cross-legged on the floor (no furniture save one low table), facing the white wall. (The ceilings, floors,

and walls in his house were all white.)

"Are you meditating, or what?" I asked him.

"Not even that," he replied. "I'm just being here. This is it. Just me being here."

"The main event," I added, somewhat sarcastically.

"Exactly."

He explained to me that sometimes he sat there with his eyes open, sometimes shut. When they were open, he looked at the white wall. When shut, of course, he didn't see anything at all.

"Do you have interesting thoughts?"

"No," he said. "I used to have interesting thoughts, but that was a long time ago. I've stopped that. Now my thoughts are very mundane."

"Is that your idea of enjoyment?"

"No," he said seriously. "I gave up enjoyment a long time ago. Actually, everything I do is quite boring. At the same time, the field of bliss out of which all this boredom arises is, of course, infinite."

He had given up everything. Without asking for anything in return. All he ate was a few vegetables, some lentils, maybe a slice of bread or two.

There was, of course, no meat allowed here. Almost nothing allowed here. And at the same time, you could do almost anything you chose to do at all. You could walk around the place stark naked (as I had seen some of them do here already). You could lie in the streets laughing all day (as I had seen some of them do here already). And you could just plain do any crazy thing you wanted to, which mostly was just nothing nothing nothing!

It was a beautiful place, simple and empty. All waterfalls and streams. Little lakes and rivers everywhere you turned (most of them waterfalls complete with naked holy men or women sitting in them just doing their nothing at all).

"I thought the Brahmins governed the city," I complained to Zaca.

"Mostly we let the tecks make the rules for us and carry them out. Only occasionally do we step in and take over. For instance, if we feel something must be done to ensure peaceful relations between La and some other city, or between the castes. Of course, we pay careful attention to any rules or laws we feel would either hinder or help the unfolding of higher consciousness, but more and more we are finding it best to allow the unenlightened to govern themselves and work out their own karma. The hand of guidance must be so gentle as to almost not be there at all. Almost," — he smiled sweetly —"but not quite. Just like a feather on your shoulder, helping you to decide to turn your head and glance in time to see danger, and work out your own solution. No more. No less."

I was going insane from boredom.

I had painted one room of my apartment red, one purple, one yellow, and one a hideous shade of orange. No one took any notice of it.

"Don't you have any music here?" I complained.

"Shh. Listen."

I listened. Some crickets chirping, a birdcall, and I thought I could hear running water in the distance, but wasn't sure — all arising out of an enormous silence.

"That is our music," Zaca said. "How could you ask for more?"

That was when the idea of going to Teck City and making contact with my mother first entered my mind. I don't know if it was simply an attempt to escape, or an earnest desire to see my mother again, but once the idea took root, it grew into an obsession.

"I've simply got to go to Teck City and see my mother," I told Zaca. "Can I do that?"

"You are Brahmin. You can go anywhere. Do anything. This is it, the main event," he said with a distant smile. The next day I set out for Teck City.

V

Teck City was incredible. An explosion of technical sophistication and invention. For me, this was heaven, and yet, strangely enough, I knew that I didn't belong here. It was probably my not belonging here that made it heaven.

I was born to move. Like a racehorse, or perhaps even more like a hummingbird, which I have been told lives out its entire life in the air never touching down to rest until the moment it dies. I was at home only in the running. I was the running, Shiva Shiva, as the old man had said.

And no one ran in Teck City. No, no, you were carried everywhere by moving walkways, monorails, or colorful little amusement-park-style cars on tracks.

At least in the Heart you could run. The problem was that you couldn't get any great straightaways. The roads all twisted and curved, and you kept running smack into waterfalls or lakes or weird dead ends, and there was too much shrubbery. But at least no one minded me running there. Zaca used to laugh when he saw me racing by, and sometimes shout out bizarre encouragements to me such as — "Run till you catch up," or "Never stop or the world stops with you."

But here in Teck City, I had the sensation that if you ran, you would quickly be apprehended by the citizens and put in jail or perhaps confined to a hospital for a period of psychiatric observation.

Well, I had started here, got kicked out and down, and now was returning as a Brahmin. I couldn't help but enjoy that one. Everyone bowed to me as they passed me in the street. Low, subservient bows. Crawl, you lackeys!

I learned from the authorities that my mother, who was an ornithologist, was away on a work-study location at one of Teck City's two enormous major parks and wildlife preserves, North Park. Observing and planting info-sending devices on several species of wild birds there. Soon I was in a small two-man helicopter heading out over the city toward a huge wall of green that went on and on, dissected here and there by the electric blue of lake or stream.

VI

Strange how little my mother really meant to me. Once I had attained the power to regain her, I wanted nothing so much as to leave her again. Looking into her eyes for the first time in many, many years, the obsession to be with her drained out of me instantly. And was replaced by the haunting, bittersweet knowledge of how alone I really was. Totally and irrevocably all alone. This realization brought with it an exquisite bliss that sizzled in the pit of my stomach. There she was. Mama. A boring little woman interested only in birds. Family ties. Frightened primitives huddled together in fear, shaking in their caves, while I was outside, alone. Free.

"Well," I said, "how are the fucking birds?"

"I couldn't do anything about it," she said. "It wasn't just that you were flunking out of the classes. You were destroying them. The other kids were acting up. You were disrupting everyone's thoughts. Everyone around you."

"They needed to have their thoughts disrupted," I said.

"I could have gone with you, but I couldn't have, really. I couldn't have made it out there. You know that. And I had my work, you know. The birds. I have dedicated my life to the study of the birds."

After a long pause . . . "Can you forgive me?" She wanted it all.

"What difference would it make?" I said.

And then, after a long pause: "Well, how are the birds?"

The birds, it turned out, were not all that well. Several species were dying out.

"Nature is harsh," I said.

"These species are dying out mostly due to the carelessness of man, not due to nature."

"Man is nature," I replied, probably once again disrupting the thoughts of those around me.

Early the next morning we set out to capture a flock of wild ducks my mother had been tracking by radar.

"They should pass directly over here within an hour or two." She gestured in the direction of the enormous concealed net stretched out invisibly before us. "Be sure to keep your earstops on."

I asked her what would happen if

I took my earstops off while the sonar scream was in operation, and she explained the device to me as well as an expert teck could to a totally uneducated warrior caste, or Brahmin.

Apparently the high-pitched blast was of such intensity and at such a high frequency of oscillation that you didn't exactly hear it as a sound. But it somehow disrupted the sense of balance in your inner ear. Probably you would not be able to stand upright. Certainly you would stagger if you tried to walk, and most people would become sick and vomit, and even sometimes pass out.

A few of the birds would just drop out of the sky unconscious, into the net, but most of them would set down, flying clumsily but maintaining enough control to manage this. But as long as the sonar scream was operating, they would not be able to take off again. Mother and her assistants would run out and spray them all with tranquilizer gas.

And then, she assured me with the shining-eyed expression of the idealist, they would be tagged and bugged with all sorts of monitoring devices that would feed back a continuous flow of info that would enable us to. . . .

"Why don't we just leave them alone?" But of course, I knew what she would answer before I asked the question. I was, I realized, asking the question more of myself than of her. Was I starting to learn to question myself?

The real thing went pretty much as Mother had described it: the ducks fell down; the net sprang up. A few of the waterfowl cleared the nets and smashed into trees, of course; a couple died; and they had three bedraggled-looking little green-winged teal who would have to stay behind for a short period of convalescence; but most of the waterfowl landed safely and were gassed, tagged, bugged, and set off again by nightfall.

By then, of course, the obvious had occurred to me. I probably should have resisted it, but there it was, and there I was: karma, karma, Shiva Shiva.

I'll never forget my mother's shocked expression when I started to give the orders.

VII

We had been hiding out here for the past two days, waiting for them to pass over. Goosebrains the Barbarian was getting hard to handle, naturally!

I had made contact with Goosebrains through Lana, and Goosebrains had swallowed his stupid pride, no doubt with a lot of help from Lana, and had made the connection with the Coyotes. Somehow he had risen to the occasion, and successfully convinced them. This was a new role for Goosebrains, one that in the old days, under the old Running Dogs, would have been exclusively reserved for me. Congratulations, Goosebrains! We were all learning.

I could see the Coyotes slinking in the shrubbery around the periphery of the hidden net. They were good at slinking. Valuable trait, that. I was beginning to like them now that I had them on my side. With Goosebrains giving them lessons in arms . . . but that was in the future. Forget that.

Mother's technician was darting about the underbrush, maniacally working all the sophisticated equipment, happy as — do I dare say it? —a lark.

But Goosebrains, of course, could blow the deal. I took him aside.

"I don't like it," he growled, "any of it. I hate these skulking Coyotes. Why don't we just. . . ."

"You had better learn to like it, Goosebrains. If you want to be first lieutenant for the new Running Dogs, you have to learn to think when it's time to think, and you have to learn to wait when it's time to wait.

"Listen." I tried my conciliatory tone. "They'll pass over here. Trust Phaidor." (Phaidor was Mother's chief technician.) "He's been tracking them for a week. This is the spot."

But beneath this necessary facade of self-assurance, a stew of mixed doubts was bubbling with energy, threatening to boil over. There was a great deal of difference between wild ducks and Screaming Eagles. Screaming Eagles were tough, for one thing. Wild ducks weren't. Would they just tough it out and keep on flying? Phaidor assured me they would not.

After all, he pointed out, they have no reason to connect their sudden illness with an attack. No, they'll simply land.

Another obvious difference was that Eagles, of course, did not fly by the use of their wings. The body jet did that. The mechanical wings were used primarily for directional aid and for balance, rather like the tail on a kite. They would have to turn off the jets to come down.

Which they most certainly would, Phaidor insisted. What would you do if you suddenly were assailed by nausea and dizzinesss while streaking across the sky at sixty miles per hour? No, he assured me again, they would put down as soon as possible; there was no other choice. Meanwhile, he had compensated for the difference in possibilities by using two nets and by the placement of the sonar screamer.

So, what I was doing was letting it all ride on Phaidor, my mother's very eccentric but enthusiastic technician.

Just then, Phaidor appeared at my shoulder, positively glowing. "They're here," he whispered gleefully. "Put on your earstops."

A few minutes later, and Screaming Eagles started falling out of the sky into the huge concealed net that shot up to receive them. They either lay there vomiting or twitching, all tangled up. Or they made futile attempts to take to the sky again, bouncing around trying to get a firm foothold

in the net, bashing each other with their huge clumsy mechanical wings, and in general flopping about like wounded birds. The Coyotes rushed silently and swiftly out of hiding to administer the gas.

And very early next morning, I announced in the marketplace that the Screaming Eagles were no more, and that the new Running Dogs were in possession of forty-seven pairs of Eagle wings, complete with jets, control centers, and various assorted air-war weaponry. The Coyotes exhibited them for the ohs and ahs of the crowd.

The new Running Dogs would be opening up a branch called the Sky Raiders, as well as annexing the Coyotes as an auxiliary club. All under my leadership, of course. Volunteers for the Sky Raiders would be interviewed by my chief lieutenant, Goosebrains the Barbarian, with preference given to those who had previous flying experience, providing they could adapt to the new leadership policies. I had no doubt that most of the former Eagles would swallow their pride, as had Goosebrains, and wind up in the Running Dogs Sky Raiders, but I couldn't wait around to find out. I had other things to do.

By that afternoon I had handed my gold bracelet back to Zaca.

"Interesting," he said.

"Weren't you going to throw me out for misusing my power?" I said.

"No. No. Once a Brahmin, a Brahmin forever. Besides who's to say you misused it? Nobody got hurt, and you've united three former deadly enemies into one enormously powerful club. How will you now respond to the lesser clubs, one wonders? No. Only the future will tell if you have misused it or not. This will be interesting to see."

I handed him my bracelet. "Has anyone ever done this before? I mean, given up the gold bracelet?"

He surprised me again. He laughed. "Of course," he said. "The Brahmins have done everything you can imagine. We are totally unpredictable."

He insisted on accompanying me outside, and late that afternoon, as the sun was just beginning to set, we stepped outside the gates into Outer La.

Everyone was bowing and scraping to him, with his gold bracelet, while I again wore the flaming red of the warrior caste. I noticed, out of the corner of my eye, the crazy old servant-caste rain worshiper was among them. He was down on his hands and knees doing his lowest-of-the-low number, when suddenly Zaca gasped. His eyes opened up so wide that I was afraid he was having a heart attack.

Then he threw himself down in the dirt before the old man, shouting in a passionate voice, "Oh highest of the high, shine your light that burns away all darkness on this lowly one. Let this miserable form destroy itself

in service for you. Rise up. Please do not remain thus. Rise up and let me prostrate myself before you."

The old man stood up, dusted himself off, and smiled at me. "Let someone else grovel for a change," he said.

Zaca was still muttering and beseeching, but his emotions had got the better of him, and he was weeping too hard to be understood.

Finally the old man whispered something in his ear, and the lordly Brahmin arose from the dirty road and, still weeping, disappeared back through the gates. The crowd dispersed, until just I and the old man were left. It was sunset.

"How can you be highest of the high and lowest of the low at the same time?" I said.

"Are you asking me, or are you asking you?" he said.

"Do you always answer questions with questions?" I said, trying to one-up him.

"Is it possible," he said, "to ask questions, and leave them opened, unanswered, because to answer them is to put an end to them? But is it possible to ask them and leave them open so that they lead, one to the next? Is it possible to live like that?" he said, one-upping me so far I would never get within reach again.

How can you be the highest of the high and, at the same time, the lowest of the low? What is higher, servant or ruler? Can you step out of that endless chain of violence that streams on before you and after you? Or, wait a minute, is that stream of violence different from you? Are you nothing but reaction to — or are you —?

Suddenly my mind blossomed into a bouquet of questions, just opening and opening. I saw that if I didn't answer, I could travel inwardly across them and plunge into infinity. But, of course, that was an answer. And with that answer my mind closed up again.

"What will you do now?" the old man said.

I looked out across my sweet, brutal city, toward the distant, empty plains. The sun was almost down.

"What I always do," I said. "Run."

I ran.



Books to Look For

by Orson Scott Card

The Watchers of Space, Nancy Etchemendy, (Avon/Camelot, paper, 124 pp, $2.50)
The Crystal City, Nancy Etchemendy, (Avon/Camelot, paper 173 pp, $2.50)

Nancy Etchemendy's fine short stories for adults have recently appeared in the pages of this magazine — but I met her before the first of them was published. She was the small, deceptively young-looking woman at Clarion in 1982 who had somehow earned the nickname "space cadet" and yet relaxed in the evening with a cigar and a bottle of something decisively alcoholic. In short, she is as unforgettable in person as she is in print.

So at Christmastime, when I saw two of her young-adult novels in B. Dolphin Ltd., Greensboro's children's bookstore, I bought them for my children. For my children, mind you — not for me.

Last week my oldest, Geoffrey, finally tore himself away from Encyclopedia Brown long enough to start reading his Christmas books. *The Watchers of Space* kept him up way past his bedtime. *The Crystal City* did the same the next night. He came to me with wide and weary eyes at midnight, saying, "Dad, you've *got* to read these books. I just couldn't stop reading them."

So, yes, I *did* have to read them. And because of Geoffrey, I read them with new eyes — with the child's vision that I once brought to Norton's *Catseye* and *Galactic Derelict*, to Heinlein's *Citizen of the Galaxy* and *Tunnel in the Sky*.

The Watchers of Space is the story of a young brother and sister who save their doomed generation-ship by making contact with the Watchers; in the process they learn that the strength of humanity is not that we are good or evil, but that we are creators. *The Crystal City* takes place on their new world, where they meet an alien race, terrifying in form but loving in character and brilliant in mind; now their challenge is to stop short-sighted humans from provoking a terrible war with them.

Because I read these books within a day of Michael Kube-McDowell's *Empery*, I recognized that Etchemendy's children's books deal with almost exactly the same basic plot movements and moral questions as Kube-McDowell's far more weighty trilogy. And as I talked to my son about them, I learned that these issues had not escaped him. Speaking to naive and wide-eyed readers, Etchemendy had done what all good storytellers do: she had stretched the moral universe of her audience. I'm not sure whether Geoffrey or I en-



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joyed the novels more.

It's good to remember that there are still people writing strong, truthful science fiction stories that are simple and clear enough for children to grasp them. Etchemendy's work is no less "serious" when she writes to children than it is when she writes to magic-seeking grown-ups like ourselves. So sure, buy these books for any bright young kids you know. But read them yourself first. It won't hurt you to spend an hour as a bedazzled ten-year-old again.

L. Ron Hubbard Presents Writers of the Future vol. III, Algis Budrys, ed. (Bridge, paper, 429 pp, $4.50)

The first two *Writers of the Future* books were good sf anthologies by any standard — some bad stories, many fair stories, and some very fine work. Since I had had low expectations for a series of anthologies consisting entirely of work by previously unpublished authors, I was pleasantly surprised.

This latest volume, however, is not just good, it is important. It contains the debuts of many talented writers, some of whom will certainly be among the most important sf writers of the 90s:

Dave Wolverton, whose "On My Way to Paradise" is a brilliant story of a struggle for survival and a vain quest for trust, set in a believable, fascinating Latin-American future.

Martha Soukup. whose "Living in the Jungle" is a fascinating dark comedy about a woman who tries to set up housekeeping in the last surviving forest in the world.

Carolyn Ives Gilman, whose "The Language of the Sea" is an exciting tale of a sea-going utopia invaded by gung-ho survival types.

M. Shayne Bell, whose gripping "Jacob's Ladder" is only a hint of even stronger work to come.

Tawn Stokes, with her unforgettable vision of humans living on reservations under the care of giant sentient roaches, in "No Pets."

Paula May, whose haunting "Resonance Ritual" did *not* win a quarterly prize in the contest — her well-deserved inclusion here explains why the anthology needed its editor, instead of relying solely on the contest judges.

J.R. Dunn, Eric M. Heideman, Mary Catherine McDaniel — I wish I had space to tell you about all the fine new writers and their excellent stories.

The Writers of the Future contest has come of age. It is plain that some of the most talented new sf writers are deliberately holding back on work that could clearly be published somewhere else, just so it can be entered in this contest. As a result, they get some terrific prize money — and you can have the pleasure of reading one of the year's best anthologies.

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Land of Dreams, James P. Blaylock, (Arbor House, cloth, 242 pp. $15.95)

People kept telling me what a good writer James Blaylock was. They pointed to his World Fantasy Award-winning story "Paper Dragons" back in 1985; they urged me to read his novel *Homunculus* in 1986.

And I tried. I really did. I read "Paper Dragons" from beginning to end, more than once, and hated every minute of it. It wasn't a story. It was just language. I tried reading *Homunculus* and could never get more than five pages into it without getting distracted into doing something more exciting, like counting lintballs on the couch.

Reading Blaylock at that point was like listening to a singer vocalize. Beautiful voice, but there was neither melody nor lyric. It was all sound. All performance, with no sense or structure.

But a friend sent me *Land of Dreams* and told me, "This one's different. This time Blaylock is writing *about* something."

Folks, I'm here to tell you that it's true. *Land of Dreams* is a wonderful real-life fantasy, the story of a California town passing through a periodic "solstice," a time when a phantom train brings a strange and dangerous circus to town, when a mouse-sized man and a giant shoe are both sighted, when crabs migrate along the shore and the ghost of a lovely old woman in the attic of the orphanage dispatches a girl to carry clothing to her long lost husband, who is due to reappear, stark naked, at the river's edge.

All this quiet madness flows around Jack Portland, whose mother and father died under mysterious circumstances many years before. Jack plays straight man to the most bizarre and wonderful cast of characters since Richard Grant's *Saraband of Lost Time* or Gene R. Wolfe's *Book of the New Sun*.

The writing style is still slow and, sometimes, overdetailed and overfigured. But the story is so strong that it can sustain Blaylock's elaborate performance. I hope this is a permanent change and not an aberration in Blaylock's writing. If it is, he won't just be a "writer's writer," anymore. He'll be a "reader's writer," and that is by far the higher calling.

Station Gehenna, Andrew Weiner, ("Isaac Asimov Presents," Congdon & Weed, cloth)

Andrew Weiner's quietly devastating short fiction has been a refreshing and illuminating gift to the field of science fiction for many years now, ever since his first sf story in Ellison's *Again Dangerous Visions*; readers of this magazine may remember his "Station Gehenna" from April 1982. Now, with his first novel, he proves that what he does so well at shorter lengths he can do even better when he has elbow room.

Station Gehenna is structured as a mystery. Lewin, the narrator, is an undercover psychologist for Spooner Corporation, investigating a suicide in the terraforming station on planet Gehenna. He finds that the five surviving crew members are not exactly stable, and one of them almost certainly helped the suicide along.

Worse, the narrator begins having strange dreams — and then waking hallucinations — of a giant walking in the mists of this almost lifeless planet. Is he crazy? Is there really a killer in the station? Are they caught up in a web of high-level corporate intrigue? Or is the planet simply a place where human beings cannot live?

Like the best contemporary mystery writers, Weiner gives us a "detective" who is not always right, not always strong, and not always good. But Lewin is right enough, strong enough, and good enough that we care about what happens to him. The result is a gripping, believable story that has the fascination of the best mysteries and the wonderment of the best science fiction.

Algis Budrys will return in the October issue with a report on Stephen King's new novel, Misery.

Coming soon

The October issue will be our 38th anniversary issue, featuring a new novella by Keith Roberts along with short stories by Ed Bryant, Kate Wilhelm, George Alec Effinger, John Kessel, Bob Leman and others. Algis Budrys will report on the new Stephen King novel; Isaac Asimov and Harlan Ellison will make their usual illuminating appearances, and we will offer at least one pleasant new surprise.

Don't miss the gala occasion. The October issue is on sale September 1.

John Morressy's new story concerns a wizard named Tristaver, a specialist in tavern tricks and love charms, who is confronted with something a bit out of his specialty: i.e. a loathsome creature with a long, dripping mouth and sharp teeth.

A Legend of Fair Women

BY
JOHN MORRESSY

When the others departed for their various rocks, caves, lakes, fens, bogs, and dens, Tristaver remained at the inn. As he explained to his colleagues, it was a rare opportunity to get out of the workshop, enjoy a change of scene, and clear his mind of mundane affairs.

Like so much that Tristaver said, this was true, but it was not the whole truth. He certainly looked forward to getting out of his workshop; indeed, he disliked shutting himself away in the first place. Visiting unfamiliar scenes and meeting new people also gave him great pleasure. But his main purpose in staying on after his fellow wizards left was to drum up trade.

Tristaver would never have admitted that business was bad; it was not all it should be, perhaps, and not all that he desired, but it was not really bad. Not disastrously bad. The alchemists were drawing customers away, and the barbarians were making travel difficult and dangerous for potential clients, and a general decline of trust in wizards seemed to be spreading among the public; but there was still enough work to go around. Not an abundance, to be sure, but a sufficiency. A bare sufficiency. And how long it would last, no one could tell. Even seers and diviners hedged on that one.

All things considered, meeting new clients whenever and wherever possible made very good sense. It had occurred to Tristaver in the midst of packing for this trip that the annual meeting of the Wizards' Guild was the perfect opportunity. A gathering of major wizards, witches, warlocks, sorcerers, and enchanters would surely draw people in need of magical assistance. And with the meeting sched-

uled to last only three days, and traveling conditions being what they were, many of those seeking help would arrive too late to get it. So he had decided to stay over at the inn for an extra week or so.

Thus far, Tristaver had been given no reason to regret his decision. The food was more nearly edible now, with the crowd gone; meals were punctual, too, and the servings larger. The inn was much more peaceful, and he had a room and a bed all to himself. A sizable contingent of the resident fleas had decamped with the departure of the guests, adding to his comfort. Most important, he had gained five new clients, and this was only the fourth day of his extended stay.

The commissions had been nothing exciting — three love potions, a cure for elf-shot cattle, and a charm against wind — but as Tristaver reminded himself, a client is a client. They had all gone away satisfied, and would no doubt make his name, and the quality of his work, known to friends and neighbors in need of wizardly assistance.

And in a way, it was just as well that no one had come to him for deliverance from an elaborate, well-planned spell buttressed against counterspells by tricky counter-counterspells to thwart, perplex, and perhaps even bring grievous harm to the one who attempted to undo them. Such things were as embarrassing to turn down as they were dangerous to accept. Fortunately, he could always refer clients to colleagues who specialized in such things, and reserve himself for work less perilous.

Tristaver believed that love should be requited. In a world where so many otherwise healthy and happy people sighed and pined, panted and swooned, and wasted away with longing, he considered himself a public benefactor. He helped people attain their hearts' desires.

Tristaver was very good at love charms, spells, potions, and drafts. So good was he at this particular branch of magic, in fact, that he seldom worked any other. It was much easier to refer clients to a friend who dealt in curses and execrations, transformations and translation and counterspells; it was also prudent to keep fellow wizards in one's debt.

Seated before the inn on this mild and sunny midsummer afternoon, he turned his thoughts to those absent colleagues; in particular, to two who had not attended the guild meeting. But then, Conhoon and Kedrigern never did come to meetings. Conhoon was purely and simply a misanthrope, and Kedrigern was now a married man, living far off on a mountaintop. Quite happily, too, according to report and to the evidence of the single visit Tristaver had paid him. And not even a tiny love-charm to help things along. It was enough to make one think.

Married wizards were rare; happily married wizards were all but unheard of. Wizards, as a group, tended to avoid serious relationships with women. Merlin's fate at the hand of Vivien was a stern warning, and it was heeded.

On the other hand, Kedrigern's wife was a lovely woman and a charming hostess, as well as a capable hand at magic. And she'd also managed to get Kedrigern to dress a bit more respectably, which was much to her credit. He still dressed like a working man, but at least he now looked to be a successful working man. Conhoon dressed like an itinerant beggar, and was beyond helping.

Appearance was important, Tristaver told himself for perhaps the ten thousandth time. He rose from his bench, brushed crumbs from his lap, and smoothed his long black robe, glittering with symbols cabalistic, astronomical, and esoteric. The robe was damnably warm for this time of year, but a wizard — pace Conhoon and Kedrigern — must dress the part. Enough of a concession to have laid aside his steeple-crowned hat. He ran his fingers through his long snowy beard and brushed back the silvery locks that hung to his shoulders. It was not enough merely to *be* a wizard, one had to *look like* a wizard. Appearance *was* important, and if others did not grasp that truth, so much the worse for them.

And so much the better for me, thought Tristaver. Clients wanted a wizard who looked the part. It gave them confidence.

Even as he reflected upon this comfortable axiom, its truth was underscored by the appearance of a youth brightly clad and well spoken who stopped before him, bowed gracefully, and said, "If it please you, sire, have I the honor of addressing Master Tristaver, the great wizard?"

Arching one bristly white eyebrow, fingering the silver medallion of the Wizards' Guild that hung around his neck, Tristaver said in his deep theatrical voice, "Indeed you have, my fine lad. What seek you of a wizard, advice or assistance?"

The youth blushed. "I seek nothing for myself, Master Tristaver. The one I serve, the brave Berrendal, would have your aid in a perilous quest."

"Ah, I see. A perilous quest. And does your master seek a spell for safety along the way, or swift victory, or protection against the magic of others? A love-charm, perhaps? What, precisely, is the nature of the aid sought?"

"If it please you, sire, I know not. But the bold and gallant Berrendal awaits within, and requests the pleasure of your company at a light repast, over which details may be clarified," said the young squire.

"I shall join your master within. Lead on, my boy," said Tristaver with a sweeping gesture that set the symbols on his robe to flashing in the sun-

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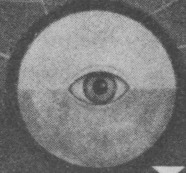
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light. He donned his tall hat and followed the youth.

The innkeeper appeared in the doorway. "Mister Tristaver, I was coming to inform you. There's a—," he began, but the wizard raised a hand to silence him. "I am aware, Wat, and I go to join Berrendal."

"Oh. Aye. Well, then. . . ," said the innkeeper, rubbing his bald head.

Wat was a decent soul, an innkeeper who looked his part: jovial round face, thick brown beard, great tub of a belly swelling under a stained apron, swift and silent and ubiquitous in the service of his guest. His wife, too, looked as one would expect her to: apple-cheeked, snub-nosed, cheerful and bustling and never empty-handed. And even the squire, walking with light step, gaily clad and fresh-faced, cheeks as yet innocent of the razor, looked the part of a true squire. Things were as they should be, and Tristaver entered the inn smiling at this happy thought, walking with practiced skill at just the proper pace to make his robe billow most effectively. That always impressed a client.

A tall figure rose from a table in a dark corner to greet him. Tristaver removed the hat from his silvery locks, bowed, and said, "The noble Berrendal, I presume. I am Tristaver, the wizard, he whose assistance you seek."

"Welcome, wizard. Come, join me in a tankard of this excellent ale, and partake of this fine stew," said Berrendal in a voice curiously soft for one of such stature.

"I thank you, sir," said Tristaver.

"Do not call me 'sir,'" Berrendal said curtly.

Tristaver's eyes were adjusting to the dim interior light, and as he took a closer, clearer look at Berrendal, he had a shock. The features, darkened by sun and toughened by wind though they were, showed not planes and angles but gentler outlines. The dark, rust-and grease-besmuttered gipon covered a figure that despite its breadth of shoulder was clearly not masculine.

"Are you astonished by the sight of a warrior maid, wizard? Or are you one of those who would deny a woman's right to take up arms?" Berrendal asked. Her voice was not quite so soft as it had been at first; it acquired an edge.

"Not at all. Not at all, my lady. I'm merely surprised. One so seldom meets a maid in arms. Your lad said nothing to prepare me."

"Your eyes are not sharp, wizard. My lad is a lass. Kaimi!"

At her name, the squire removed her hat, and long brown curls tumbled below her shoulders. She smiled mischievously at the wizard.

"So he is. *She* is. A lass. Not a lad, I mean. Your squire," Tristaver fumbled. "As I said, Berrendal, it is not a common occurrence for both a knight and his squire . . . *her* squire One does not expect. . . ."

"I know, wizard, I know," said Ber-

rendal with a sigh. "In truth, I expected no better reception — though I had hoped to find you a keen-eyed, quick-witted master of magics; a man bold of heart, strong of arm, full of the vigor of prime manhood."

Tristaver unleashed his warmest and most winning smile on Berrendal, saying, "How fortunate you are, then my lady, to have your hopes so fully realized."

Kaimi clapped both hands over her mouth to smother what might have been a sneeze but sounded suspiciously like a giggle. Berrendal coughed and cleared her throat. "You?" she asked in patent disbelief.

"Of course. I must know the details of your problem before I make a firm commitment, but obviously I meet your qualifications," said Tristaver, shifting his stance so as to get the full benefit of sunlight on his medallion and the symbols of his robe.

Berrendal studied him. She did not appear impressed. After a time she said, "I appreciate your willingness to help me, wizard, but I think the work at hand requires someone. . . . Well, you are somewhat advanced in years to be going on a quest, are you not?"

"Old? Do you call me old? I, Tristaver, *old*?" Tristaver said, his eyes flashing. He stood, flinging his arms wide in a dramatic gesture that never failed to awe, and in a deep and wrathful voice declared, "Know, stripling, that I am 229 years old, the prime of a wizard's life span. Let me hear no more of *old!*"

"Your hair is silver," said Berrendal, and Kaimi added, "Your beard is white."

"That does not make me old. That makes me distinguished. Venerable."

"You are indeed venerable. I cannot deny it," Berrendal conceded. "But perhaps someone just a bit . . . less venerable . . . would better suit my purpose."

"Younger wizards are worthless. They can barely spell," said Tristaver scornfully. "They lack experience, judgment, and maturity."

"But they have strength, stamina, and endurance."

Tristaver dismissed her words with a contemptuous flick of the hand. "You enumerate the virtues of oxen, not of wizards. Success in a quest does not depend on brute force. A quest calls for subtlety, imagination, artfulness, a sophisticated outlook: the virtues of a mature wizard. But surely you know all this, or you would not have sought a wizard's aid."

Berrendal and Kaimi exchanged a noncommittal glance, and Berrendal said, "You are persuasive."

"I merely appeal to reason."

Berrendal nodded thoughtfully. "You almost sway me, wizard. But I think it would be best—"

"Enough of talk, my lady," said Tristaver in his most commanding tone. This was getting out of hand. To be rejected as "too venerable" by a

green girl lacking even an elementary knowledge of magic was insupportable; especially when the innkeeper, his wife, and the kitchen slavey were looking on, eager to witness his humiliation and blab it to everyone who crossed their threshold. It was no longer a matter of a new client and a quick fee — honor was at stake.

He rummaged through his inventory of spells — it did not take long — and decided on The Boiling Tankard as the most appropriate. It was simple, fast, and not terribly demanding.

Drawing himself up to his full height, raising his arms overhead, he lowered his left hand slowly, dramatically, until the first two fingers pointed at Berrendal's tankard, which was close to half full. He murmured a phrase, let his right hand fall, and suddenly the ale in the tankard began to bubble furiously, emitting a squeal of metal and a great cloud of pungent steam that forced Berrendal and Kaimi back from the table. An awed gasp and soft cries from behind him told Tristaver that his feat had impressed the staff of the inn as well; and that was fortunate, for his heart was palpitating and his head was ringing. There would be no more magic done this day.

"Well spelled, wizard! A bold stroke!" Berrendal cried heartily from behind the obscuring veil of steam. Dissipating the fumes with vigorous sweeps of her arm, she rose, beaming, and extended a hand. "You have proved your mettle, and you are welcome to my service."

Tristaver took the offered hand. Berrendal's grip was firm, her fingers callused. "I thank you my lady," he said, his voice subdued.

"Will you join me in this meal?"

"I think it best . . . that I look to my magic at once, that I may help you all the quicker. When do you depart?"

"We leave at first light. Be packed and ready."

"Packed? Am I expected to come on this quest with you?"

"Of course. Does not every quest require a wizard?"

"No, not necessarily." Tristaver paused, feeling uneasy. "Actually, I had not planned on any long trips. I do not, as a rule, do quests. They take up so much time, and I am in great demand."

"You are in demand now, wizard."

"Perhaps I could work a spell for you before you leave."

"Your presence is required. But be of good cheer," Berrendal said, smiling to reassure him. "It will be but a short quest, and you will find me generous."

Tristaver took his leave, trudged up the narrow stairs, and collapsed on his bed. The spell had taken a heavier toll than he expected. As he drifted off to sleep, he realized that he still had no idea of the nature of the quest in which he was now involved. It was to be short, and well

paid, and that was all to the good. But what was the purpose? Where the destination? How great the danger? He wanted very much to rush downstairs and ask all these questions of Berrendal, but he found that he wanted even more to have a nice nap. He napped soundly until just before dawn.

Next morning, when they had gone about an hour's distance from the inn, Tristaver rode up beside Berrendal and asked, "Are you at liberty to discuss details of the quest, my lady? I am curious."

Berrendal set her jaw firmly and fixed him with a steely eye. "In a moment of wrath, taunted past endurance by my brothers and my father's men, I vowed to do a deed no man has ever done."

"What deed is that?"

She looked away uncomfortably. "At the time, I had no idea. But I have since decided. I shall pluck the black fruit of the Grove of Desparation and bring it home to fling in the faces of those who have not the courage to seek it themselves."

Tristaver's heart gave a leap, and his mouth dried up. Faintly, he said, "My lady Berrendal . . . think of the danger!"

"Ha! What is a quest without danger?"

Much safer was the reply that came at once to mind, but Tristaver checked his tongue before speaking the words. Instead he said, in as calm a voice as he could manage, "It is one thing to risk danger. It is another thing altogether to throw one's life away. This quest is madness."

"And what do you know of the Grove of Desperation?" she asked with fine scorn.

"Far more than you do, it's clear. To reach it, one must cross the Brook of Misgivings, one drop of which, touching the skin, brings about a complete loss of self-confidence."

Berrendal shrugged. "Brooks are easily crossed."

"Not this one. There is no bridge, the current is swift, the rocks are jagged, and the ford is treacherous."

"You are a wizard. You will get us safely across."

Tristaver gaped. "My lady Berrendal, I don't—," he blurted, then stopped himself before he could confess that he knew nothing about spells for safe passage over water. It was an area of his wizardly education that had been neglected. Other such areas existed, and he had an unhappy premonition that Berrendal was going to uncover them, one by one, before this quest was much older. Frowning, he concluded, "I don't know that I should. Worse awaits on the opposite bank. Whimperwood begins, where a subtle magic in the soft breezes and the fluttering leaves drains all courage from a man's heart. And at the center of Whimperwood stands the

Grove of Desperation, hung with bitter black fruit whose aroma destroys hope and cheer and make men sigh for death. Bodies hang from every tree, and the ground is thick with the bones of men who have slain themselves, or passed away in sheer despair."

"All you say is true, wizard. But this, too, is true: no woman has ever died there," Berrendal pointed out smugly.

"I've heard of none. I assumed until now that women were too sensible to go off to some hideous place in order to pluck fruit no one wants to eat."

"Then I shall be the first!"

"To die miserably in Whimperwood? Congratulations."

"Do not mock me, wizard. I must show the braggarts that a woman can perform greater deeds than any man."

"Couldn't you just go out in the tiltyard and break a few lances on them? Do you have to attempt something insane and suicidal?" Tristaver demanded, his voice rising.

"They refuse to joust with me," she said, turning to him sadly.

"Well, of course they do, you ninny! None of them wants to be the one who cracks the skull of his own sister, or of his master's daughter. Can't you see that?" Tristaver cried.

She shook her head and lowered her gaze. "No, wizard. I would defeat them all, and they know it. This quest is my only chance to prove myself."

Tristaver paused, taken aback by the simple frankness of her words. She was not boasting; she was merely speaking the truth as she saw it — and a painful truth it was, clearly. To have one's skill thwarted, one's challenges ignored, one's desire mocked, was unbearable. He felt himself softening, and murmured. "Well, perhaps you're right. But still. . . ."

"Help me, Master Tristaver," she said softly.

"I'll . . . I'll do what I can," he replied, trying frantically to think of some way to escape this quest without making himself appear a coward and a deserter.

"I knew you were not like those swaggering men at arms. You will not turn coward or desert me," she said with touching confidence.

Tristaver winced at her words. More than anything else, he wanted to be out of this. He thought, for one wild moment, of simply spurring his horse and riding off in any direction but forward until Berrendal and Kaimi were nowhere in sight. He could make a clean getaway. But Berrendal and Kaimi would surely go on, to their destruction, and he would feel terrible guilt. Whatever happened to them was their own fault, their own glory-seeking, foolish, headstrong, silly fault entirely, and he well knew it; but he had a tender conscience.

And there was always the chance that they might succeed in their quest and then come back and tell every-

one that the great wizard Tristaver was a poltroon and a craven. That would take at least a century to live down in the eyes of ordinary folk. His colleagues would never allow him to forget it, nor would they forget, and they certainly would not forgive.

There was no escape. He licked his dry lips, swallowed with some effort, and said, "Indeed I will not, my lady. Lead on."

After two uneventful days and quiet nights, they came to the Brook of Misgivings. The waters were low and the current sluggish at this time of year; at the ford, the brook was little more than ankle-deep. But Tristaver was not to be lulled into carelessness. He gave instructions that they cross on horseback, with stirrups shortened, at a slow and cautious pace with a minimum of splashing, and not dismount until they were on dry ground far up the bank.

"Well done, wizard," said Berrendal when the crossing was accomplished. "You have brought us safely past the first obstacle on our quest."

"The first, and the easiest," Tristaver pointed out.

"And easily you handled it. You used no magic at all."

"A mature and sensible wizard does not squander magic on flashy effects. If you had found one of those boy wonders you were seeking, he would probably have thrown a bridge of moonbeams and gossamer over the brook, and left himself powerless for days, and you unprotected," said Tristaver irritably.

"Then I have chosen wisely indeed."

"At least one of us has," said Tristaver under his breath as he fumbled with his stirrups. Any relief he felt at their surprisingly easy crossing had quickly soured into redoubled anxiety over what might await them.

His anxiety was soon justified. Just as he was ready to mount, he heard Kaimi cry, "Look! Those men! Those *giants*!"

Tristaver looked up and saw two oversized and very hairy men at the edge of Whimperwood. One leaned on a club the size of a tall, well-fed knight; on the shoulder of the other rested a huge double-bit ax. Both giants were grinning. The one with the club pointed at the three travelers and nudged his companion, who nodded and said something at which both chuckled. Still chuckling in a very unpleasant way, they started forward.

"No magic, wizard," said Berrendal, settling her helmet on her head. "This is warrior's work."

Tristaver gave a great sigh of relief. He had no spells for dealing with giants, or even everyday marauders. The best he could manage in that line was a short-term, all-purpose protection spell, which lacked in durability what it provided in comprehensiveness; and even this he held in reserve

for moments of absolute desperation.

Berrendal urged her steed forward at a slow walk. She reined in and cried in a loud voice, "I would enter Whimperwood. Who bars my way?"

The uglier of the two giants hefted his club and said, "We are the Three Bad Brothers of Whimperwood. I am Malface."

"And I am Malgrace," said the other, wiping his nose on his hairy forearm.

"I pound intruders into pulp," said Malface.

"And I chop them into tiny pieces," said Malgrace.

"And we'll get *you*," they said in unison.

Berrendal drew her sword and spurred her steed forward. Before Malface could raise his club, his great shaggy head was tumbling through the air and Berrendal was wheeling to face his brother, shouting her battle cry. Tristaver, frozen in astonishment, heard three whizzing sounds zip by his ear, and saw Malgrace topple like a felled maple. Three arrows protruded from his breast, no more than a finger's breadth apart.

Tristaver turned and saw Kaimi lowering a bow. Coolly, she asked him, "Where's the third? Malface spoke of three bad brothers."

Tristaver shrugged. "I don't see any sign of another. There may not be a third. Giants are notoriously poor at counting, you know."

"All the same, we'd best be careful."

"An excellent idea. Where did you get the bow? How did you string it so quickly? Where did you learn archery?"

Kaimi smiled. "A squire ought to be familiar with all available weapons, wizard. Don't you agree?"

Tristaver nodded solemnly. To Berrendal, who had just rejoined them, he said, "I see now why your father's men at arms avoided tilting with you. You're very good with weapons."

"Yes. And men are such poor losers."

"Giants are even worse losers. I suggest we move on before any more turn up," said Tristaver, mounting.

"Good thinking, Master Tristaver. Soon you'll have a chance to show your skill."

"I will? When?" asked the wizard, startled.

"I know not for certain, but surely the fabled fruit of the Grove of Desperation is guarded by a powerful spell, or some monstrous creature, or evil demons. Perhaps all three," Berrendal said with sickening enthusiasm.

Tristaver paled. "Do you think so?"

"Nay, I know not. But it stands to reason."

Tristaver nodded. He was incapable of speech. The prospect of facing some horrible adversary, either fleshly or ghostly, or both, or worse, turned his bones to butter. He felt on the point of dissolving where he sat, from sheer terror, and reluctantly urged his horse forward, into Whimperwood.

His stock of spells suddenly seemed meager, his knowledge of magic narrow, his wizardry a fraud. Making demons vanish, warding off devastating maledictions, turning back shriveling rods of black fire, transforming fiends into crickets and ogres into boulders were feats beyond his power. He had been lucky, all through his career, because everyone he met had assumed that a man who looked so much like a wizard must be a powerful wizard indeed. And Tristaver *was* a wizard, and enjoyed being one, but he had always — up to now — managed to avoid occasions requiring really serious heavy-duty wizardry. He had never had to do anything much more demanding than work a love-charm, protect against bad dreams or find lost trinkets. But once they encountered something monstrous and magical, it would take more than a love-charm, more than a silken snow-white beard and flowing silver locks and conical hat and a shimmering robe covered with arcane symbols to carry the day. Even his deep and resonant voice and his air of command would be useless without magic to support them. He was doomed to a grisly death and a name that would live after him as a mockery and a judgment, a source of everlasting shame. They were all doomed. Everyone was doomed. There was no hope.

A gentle touch on his arm brought him from his grim reverie. Kaimi was beside him, peering into his face with obvious concern.

"You seem sad, Master Tristaver. Can I help?" she asked.

"No. No one can help. There is no help anywhere. No hope. We're all doomed," he said in a slow, mournful voice.

"Master Tristaver, say not so! This is the power of Whimperwood, chilling your heart and draining your great courage — you must resist!"

"I can't resist. I'm doomed."

"Use your magic!"

"What magic? I have no magic. Tavern tricks and sleight of hand. No magic. No courage," he said in a hollow monotone. "I'm doomed. We're all—"

His voice rose in a shocked, angry cry as Berrendal flung a helmetful of icy water in his face. Gasping, he blinked the drops from his eyes and looked around in bewilderment.

"How do you feel now?" Berrendal asked.

"Wet, thank you. What was all that talk about doom?" the wizard demanded peevishly.

"It was *your* talk. Don't you remember?"

"No. I only remember . . . I vaguely recall feeling a bit downhearted."

Kaimi cried, "You kept saying we were doomed!"

"It must have been a momentary seizure of melancholy. Too much deep thinking will do that."

"No, wizard, it is the spell of

Whimperwood. As I suspected, it destroys a man's courage, but not a woman's. You can see that Kaimi and I feel no fear," said Berrendal triumphantly.

"I feel slightly better myself," said Tristaver. He glanced up at the leaves, all busily aflutter. He heard the wind sigh and moan high in the evergreens. His spirits began to sink. "But it's no use. Brave or cowardly, we're all—"

Another helmetful of cold water brought him to himself. "I'm all right now," he said quickly. "As long as I don't look at those leaves, or listen too closely to the wind, I won't lose heart. It's the leaves and the wind that make the courage go."

"Use your magic, to be safe," Kaimi urged.

"Better uses for my power may lie ahead," said Tristaver hoping desperately that he was wrong.

All that day and night, and the next morning, it seemed that he was indeed wrong. They rode on at a brisk pace, saw no one nor any sign of living creature, heard no untoward sounds, smelled no foul and sulphurous odors. Despair did not return to plague the wizard, nor did the spirits of Berrendal or Kaimi flag in the least. But at midmorning of their second day in Whimperwood, they reached the Grove of Desperation, and things quickly changed.

Bones and rusted bits of armor lay thick on the ground. Rotting figures hung from the trees. At the very center stood one thick-trunked tree with a broad canopy of dark leaves. No men hung on this tree. Its limbs were weighed down with a different burden: pulpy black globes about the size of small caldrons bowed the branches almost to the ground.

At sight of the black fruits, Berrendal gave a shout of joy. She and Kaimi sprang from their saddles, and Kaimi produced a sack into which Berrendal dropped the fruits as she plucked them, or took them from the ground where they had fallen among the dry bones.

"What luck, wizard! No guardian, and the fruit so ripe it almost falls into the sack. And look at all these windfalls!" Berrendal called over her shoulder.

"I'll just wait for you here on my horse, if you don't mind. Hurry, please. I can feel a very depressed mood coming on," Tristaver replied.

"I need only fill this sack, and we'll start back at a gallop."

"Good. Hurry," said Tristaver, setting his teeth against the awful, glooming, soul-chilling atmosphere of the grove.

"I'm almost—," Berrendal began, and stopped short, as did Kaimi in the process of shouting, "We're practically—"

The guardian of the grove had arrived. It had come as swiftly and silently as the shadow of a passing

cloud, and like a cloud, it darkened the grove by its presence.

It was a thing of unsurpassed loathsomeness, ugly beyond the power of words to describe or brush to delineate. Tristaver's first impression was of a giant moldy jellyfish with many legs; long, whiplike tentacles; and narrow, glowing eyes. The eyes were fixed on the intruders.

Tristaver was close to paralysis from sheer funk, but the desire to survive was even stronger than the impulse to faint. With a great effort he managed to steady his voice and put on a calm, even nonchalant, façade. He raised a hand in greeting and said, "Good morning! We were just picking some fruit. Windfalls, mostly. You don't mind, do you?"

The creature opened a long, dripping mouth filled with sharp teeth. It made a hideous mewing sound and emitted a gust of rancid breath. As it moved closer, with a clatter of displaced bones, Tristaver saw that its hide combined in a most disgusting way the scaliness of a serpent, the hairiness of a tarantula, and the sliminess of a plate of raw oysters. Bits of it were scaly, bits hairy, other bits slimy; some places were both scaly and hairy, or hairy and slimy, or slimy and scaly. Most astonishing and repellent to the wizard's sensibilities, the creature was in many places scaly *and* slimy *and* hairy simultaneously.

Waving again, this time in farewell, Tristaver said, "Lovely meeting you. Nice of you to welcome us like this. We really must run now. Thanks for the fruit."

Berrendal and Kaimi had mounted, and Berrendal couched her lance, ready to resist any attack. Too quickly for the eye to follow, a tentacle whipped out, snatched the lance from her grip, and snapped it like a dry reed. The guardian of the grove made a sound that resembled a man shrieking, squealing, and retching at the same time.

"Does the foul thing dare to laugh at us?" Berrendal demanded angrily.

"I have no idea. It may be asking us how we like the weather," Tristaver replied. "Let's start riding out. Be casual. Don't panic."

They had gone no more than a dozen paces, when the guardian scuttled at incredible speed through the grove and loomed before them. "I may be hideous, but I am quick and agile. You cannot escape," it hissed.

Tristaver drew up beside Berrendal. In a lowered voice he said, "You still have your sword. Take care of this thing."

She laid her hand on her sword hilt, but did not draw it and charge boldly forward. She did not move. After a moment's reflective pause, she said, "No need for gratuitous violence. Put a spell on it."

"I'm not talking about gratuitous violence; I'm talking about a heroic feat! Think what a story it will make for the boys back at your father's castle!"

"I have already done a heroic feat. I have plucked the fruit of the Grove of Desperation."

"You picked a sack of fruit! Mostly windfalls! What kind of feat is that, compared to slaying a monster?" Tristaver cried in desperation.

"It will have to do."

They glared at one another for an instant, then both turned and smiled at Kaimi. The squire shook her head decisively. "Oh no. I'm not qualified for that kind of work. I'm only a squire."

"Think of it as a challenge," Berrendal urged.

"I think of it as suicide," said Kaimi flatly.

The three of them were silent for a time, eyeing one another uncomfortably, until Berrendal said, "The situation requires magic. No warrior would have a chance against this creature."

Tristaver gave a grunt of very unenthusiastic agreement. "I suppose not," he muttered.

"This is your moment, Master Tristaver. This is why you came along. Go to it," Kaimi urged him.

"All right, all right. I'll speak to the thing."

"Don't chat with it; kill it!" Berrendal snapped.

Masking his fear with hauteur, Tristaver turned to her and said, "No need for gratuitous violence, my lady, as you have already pointed out. I will attempt to learn this creature's weakness." He took a deep breath to compose himself and rode forward. He had to get them out of this with some bold, brilliant, subtle stroke of magic. He had not the slightest idea what it was going to be.

The guardian sat — or stood, or crouched, or rested, or hunkered down, according to which limbs one observed — awaiting him. It had not moved or spoken since barring their path. Tristaver hoped it had somehow mysteriously died. It had not.

"So . . . you come to plead for your wretched lives," it said in a rasping, hissing, unmistakably scornful voice.

"Yes, if it will help," Tristaver said eagerly.

"Nothing can help you now. Not even magic, in case you're thinking of trying a spell on me. I am indestructible."

"It certainly looks bad for us."

"Utterly hopeless," said the guardian, sounding pleased.

"If you don't mind telling me, what are your plans?"

"Nothing special. I will eat you, as I eat certain selected intruders."

"I see. Eat us." Tristaver nodded, doing his very best to keep up a cool front. "And when does the meal take place?"

"As soon as my servants arrive. You haven't seen three giants, have you?"

"No, we haven't," said Tristaver truthfully.

"They'll be along soon. They pre-

pare all my meals. Malface, the ugliest one, pounds everything with his club until it's nice and tender. Malgrace, the gross one, hacks it into bite-sized pieces; and then Malpace, the slow one, cooks it and serves it." Tapping three of its feet impatiently and twitching a pair of tentacles, the guardian said, "I do wish they'd hurry."

Here was a ray of hope. Tristaver thought. With two of the giants slain, the third might have run off in fright; dinner could not be properly prepared; he, Berrendal, and Kaimi might be spared. On the other hand, if Malpace turned up and explained what had become of his brothers, the guardian of the grove might be very angry. It could go either way. Not a very bright ray of hope, Tristaver had to admit to himself. The wisest course seemed to be to keep the creature talking and hope it would reveal something he could turn to their advantage.

"It must be difficult finding good servants in a place like this," he said sympathetically.

"Almost impossible." The creature made a noise that sounded like a gale in a dense forest. Tristaver concluded that it was sighing. "Ah, wizard, when I think of the servants I once had. Hundreds of servants. Maybe thousands. I never bothered to have them counted."

"You must have been very prominent."

"I was a queen, wizard! A wicked queen." The guardian paused, then rasped nostalgically, "Oh, was I wicked! As wicked as they come. I was so wicked that the wicked fairies grew jealous of me. It was wicked fairies that did me in."

"A curse?" Tristaver asked.

"A curse," said the creature, sighing once again. "A curse personally drafted by the Queen of the Fairies and her council. It's a cooperative fairy curse, the kind no human magic can undo."

Tristaver raised his medallion and studied the guardian through the Aperture of True Vision. He saw the outline of a woman. The details of her dress and appearance was obscured by the intensity of the fairy magic, but she was clearly and unmistakably a woman.

His heart soared. He might not be able to undo the curse himself, but he could advise, consult, assist. Here was a bargaining point. "But surely the curse can be lifted. Even the cruelest of wicked fairies cannot inflict a curse without an escape clause," he pointed out.

"Oh, there's an escape clause," said the guardian bitterly. "If a handsome prince falls helplessly in love with me just as you see me now, the curse ends forthwith."

Tristaver stroked his beard thoughtfully, no longer so hopeful. "Not much chance of that happening, is there?"

"Would a homely prince do? Or an attractive yeoman?"

"Even an ugly serf is too much to expect. Look at me, wizard. I'd be lucky to get a glance from another thing like myself. Not that I'd *want* to." They were both thoughtfully silent for a time, then the creature said, "No, I'm going to be what I am for a long time to come. And to tell the truth, I don't mind it all that much."

"But surely, having been a queen. . . ."

"Ah, but I was a *wicked* queen. And the way those fairies rigged the spell, if I go back to being a queen, I won't be wicked anymore. I'll be sweet. I don't think I'm ready for that."

"Do you mean you'd turn into a nice, gentle, kindly, loving queen?"

"Yes. Beautiful, too."

Again Tristaver saw hopes of escape. "Then surely I can find a handsome prince to save you! Believe me, guardian, I can find dozens! You can have your pick!"

"It wouldn't work. They have to fall in love with me as I am."

"Leave that to me. Guardian, your worries are over."

"Oh, I don't know. Handsome princes can be so tedious. And they're not very bright, either. They keep coming here and getting themselves eaten."

"But think of it — you wouldn't have to live in this gloomy grove anymore, eating people. You'd have lots of servants. A lovely palace," Tristaver said with a touch of desperation in his voice.

"I've grown accustomed to this place. It may be a gloomy grove to you, but to me it's home. And I have all the servants I required. Where *are* those giants, anyway?"

Tristaver saw that it was time to take a firmer stance. If blandishments did not work, perhaps a show of force would.

"They're not coming," he said grimly. "Two have been slain, and the third is probably in headlong flight. I'm giving you a chance, guardian. I'm a kindly man. Let us go, and I promise to return within a fortnight with a prince so handsome—"

The guardian reared up amid a storm of writhing tentacles, knocking loose one of the hanging corpses, sending bones and bits of rusted chain mail flying past Tristaver's head. "My servants slain! Then you will all die at once!"

"Now, just a minute—"

"You ask a minute? I will give you that, and no more: one minute to say your farewells and choose which of you will be eaten first. Go! Join your companions for the last time!" the creature roared.

Tristaver rode back to Berrendal and Kaimi, his mind working furiously. There had to be a way out. He was a wizard. Wizards are survivors, he told himself fervently. Wizards do not get eaten by monsters; they overcome

monsters — or else they outwit them and escape.

As a last desperate resort, there was shapechanging. He could turn himself into a hawk and be away from here, swift as an arrow. He had never quite mastered landing technique, but that was hardly a consideration now. It would be worth a few scrapes and bruises to be out of this monster's clutches. But could he really get away? he wondered. Those tentacles were quick. The thing might pluck him out of the air in flight. And how could he abandon Berrendal and Kaimi? He was here to protect them, not fly in their hour of need. No decent, self-respecting wizard would do such a thing.

But Tristaver was not a very good wizard. That was becoming painfully apparent to him. Berrendal's greeting did nothing to bolster his confidence.

"Fine job you did, wizard! You got it angry!" she snapped.

"I thought you were going to find out its weakness," Kaimi said scornfully.

"It has none. But I learned that it's a wicked queen transformed by a fairy curse."

"Then lift the curse!" they cried with one voice.

"Humans can't lift a fairy curse."

"Then use your magic! Destroy her!"

"She's indestructible."

"All right, do something else," said Berendal. When Tristaver did not reply, she looked at him suspiciously and said, "You *are* a wizard, aren't you? You do magic?"

"Of course I do magic," he said indignantly.

"Well, we haven't seen much."

"You have no faith. No trust. You saw with your own eyes how I made a tankard of cold ale to boil by my magic power."

"A tavern trick," Berrendal said contemptuously.

"And what good does that do us now?" Kaimi demanded. "We're going to be eaten because you couldn't protect us. Some wizard you are."

"Very well. You shall see magic. When you are safely home, with your miserable bag of fruit, you will remember those words and weep for shame over your ingratitude," said Tristaver grandly.

He had an idea. The only magic he could really count on was his love-charms and potions. They always worked. If he could touch this creature's heart, he and his companions would have a chance to appeal to its softer side and win their freedom. Of course, a thing like the guardian might have no softer side. It might not even have a heart. But this was their only hope.

With his back to the guardian, he drew a phial from within his robe. Uncorking it, he poured a few drops of its contents over the back of his hand. Then he wheeled his horse, tossed back his cloak, and rode at a

slow and dignified pace to confront the creature.

"So, you choose to be first," it hissed.

"You will not eat us. That would be your undoing," said Tristaver with an air of easy confidence.

"I cannot be undone! No poison harms me; no spell deters me!"

"I didn't say we'd destroy you; I said we'd be your undoing. Here," Tristaver said, extending his hand. "Take a little taste — don't bite, please — and you'll see what I mean."

A tentacle whipped out and seized his wrist. A long, dripping tongue uncurled from the guardian's mouth and slurped disgustingly over the back of Tristaver's hand. The creature paused to savor the taste. At last it released the wizard's wrists and gave it an affectionate pat with the tentacle.

"You're a cute little rascal, wizard," said the guardian.

"Is that all? Don't you feel anything more? A passionate attraction, say?"

"Don't be ridiculous. I feel a certain fondness for you. In fact, I'm so fond of you I'm going to save you for dessert. Go tell one of your companions to come forward. I'm ready to eat."

So she felt a certain fondness. Aside from the deadly peril of the situation, it was humiliating. His love potion, infallible up to now, had failed him in his moment of most need. It had turned out to be a fondness potion.

But how could it have failed? he asked himself wildly. It was his best magic, his specialty, proven by decades of experience, attested by thousands of ecstatically satisfied men and women. True, he had never tried it on a monster before. . . .

And that was the answer! The dosage was too small to have any appreciable effect on a creature so huge with a totally inhuman digestive system. The cure was perfect; it was the uncooperative patient who was at fault. And knowing that his potion still worked, he knew what he must do. It was time to make the supreme sacrifice.

"Tell me one thing, guardian: Do you find me handsome?" he asked, turning to display his profile.

"You are not unhandsome . . . in a venerable way. . . . Yes, I would concede that you are handsome."

"Thank you. And surely, having been a queen, you know that in the eyes of those with good judgment, a wizard ranks with a prince."

"So I have heard."

"Then I am, in effect, a handsome prince."

"One might say so," the guardian reluctantly allowed.

Without another word, Tristaver raised the phial to his lips and emptied the contents. He sat for a moment dazed, then he lifted his eyes to the guardian of the grove. His eyes were bright and brimming.

"Oh guardian. Dear guardian!

Loveliest of creatures," he crooned, dismounting and coming forward eagerly, arms outstretched.

"Keep away from me," rasped the thing nervously.

"Do not reject me! Oh my beloved, my adored, my beautiful one!" Tristaver rhapsodized, pressing his lips to a limp, scaly tentacle. "How fair you are! Fair in each tentacle, fair in every scale, fair in sliminess!" Tenderly he stroked the filthy matted hair of a limb, whispering, "Fair in your fuzzy furriness, your speed and agility, your sweet melodious voice, your stench!"

"Stop this!" the guardian cried. Her voice was no longer raspy, but sounded somewhat like a woman's.

"Spurn me not, my beloved," Tristaver wailed, falling to his knees, clasping his hands in appeal. "Accept my undying love, my eternal devotion! Accept me, my sweet, my lovely, my—"

The air around the guardian began to shimmer, like stony ground under a hot sun. Tristaver covered his eyes and fell heavily to the ground in a swoon. The guardian's outine wavered, the air shimmered ever more excitedly, and then came a thunderclap and a dazzling burst of light, and the guardian was gone. On the ground beside the dazed wizard lay a lovely auburn-haired lady, richly dressed, crowned and bejeweled. She sat up, shook her head, and caught sight of Tristaver. The love potion that had been so feeble in the body of a monster now coursed through her veins in full potency. With a cry, she threw herself on the wizard and began to cover his face and hands with kisses, murmuring, between kisses, "Oh my deliverer . . . My rescuer . . . my hero . . . my wise and wonderful wizard . . . my handsome . . . bold . . . resourceful wizard . . . my beloved . . . my adored . . . my lord and master . . . ," and similar enthusiastic expressions of devotion.

Tristaver blinked and gazed up into blue eyes agleam with adoration. "Madam, who are—," he began, pausing while she kissed him passionately, and concluding, "—you?"

"I am the guardian of the grove," she murmured, clasping him tightly, "and you have freed me!"

He eased himself from her embrace, rose, helped her to her feet, and, placing his hands on her shoulders, looked closely into her face. "You've changed," he said.

"It is you who have changed me, saved me, rescued me!" she cried, throwing herself into his arms, clinging to him desperately. "Never leave me. Be with me always. I will love you, serve you, be your faithful, devoted, obedient wife."

"Well, really, now," Tristaver said. He was quite overwhelmed. The burst of magic that had shattered the fairy curse forever had freed him from the effects of the love potion, but the presence of this beautiful woman in

his arms, and her passionate declarations in his ear, and her warm breath on his cheek, and her lips pressing on his, made love potions quite superfluous. "My dear lady," he said, taking her hands and leading her to his horse, "why don't we leave this place of unpleasant memory and go where we can talk things over?"

"Your wish is my command, gracious wizard," she said breathlessly. Berrendal and Kaimi had joined them by this time, and at sight of them, the disenchanted queen announced, "Before this valiant pair, I proclaim you my lord and master. My kingdom and all in it, all I have and all I am, I lay at your feet."

Tristaver raised her hand to his lips. "Very generous of you, dear lady," he said.

Berrendal and Kaimi looked on in silence as the wizard helped his lady to mount, then sprang nimbly — almost youthfully — to the saddle behind her. She slipped her arms around his waist and laid her head against his chest. He folded her in his arms.

"Protect me, bold wizard, now and always," she said sweetly.

Berrendal sighed and shook her head. She and Kaimi exchanged a glance. Kaimi shrugged fatalistically.

"Let's get moving," Berrendal said. "We've still got a long way to go."



"We're testing a new suntan lotion."

Mary Caraker wrote "Out of the Cradle" (July 1987). She has a welcome talent for describing life on other worlds, such as the planet of lights and snow and mystery known as . . .

Lumisland

BY
MARY CARAKER

His earliest memory was of the colored snow. His mother had dressed him in warm furs and set him in front of the entrance tunnel. He reached at once for the gold and green and purple sparkles, and crowed with delight when they shimmered in his mittened hands. He tasted, and knew cold that quickly turned to pain.

His mother came at his cries, and hoisted him to her hip. The other women joined in her laughter. Anders continued to scream, devastated by the betrayal.

When he was older, his mother delighted in telling the story. "Anders stuffed his mouth full of snow, like a feeding ketsi. When he started to holler, the whole camp heard him!"

Anders, even at five, didn't like to be laughed at. He knew that his father was Seppo Ahlwen, and that he was the most important man in the camp. Wasn't it called Ahlwenscamp, and wasn't it twice as large as Lahtiscamp, which he had visited once, or Jalmoscamp, where everyone lived in a single snow cave? Wasn't it his father who divided the puerhu or the hirvisen after every successful hunt? Didn't his mother wear a parka with the widest, softest ruff, and didn't she make the best fish cakes?

To young Anders, the camp was a world that couldn't possibly be improved. The half a dozen houses extended like mounds from a snowbank that had formed before an upthrusting rock formation. Part ice cave and part igloo, they faced south to obtain the warming rays of Argus. The smooth-trampled snow of the compound area in front of them was always filled with activity fascinating to a small boy. Sometimes women scraped hides and

stretched them to dry on pegs. Sometimes they cut up fish or meat: huge carcasses into smaller and smaller pieces until not a scrap was wasted. When the hunters were home, they overhauled their sleds and their skis, polishing the ice casing of the runners until they could fly over the snow with a push or flick of a pole. The old men worked, too, shaping antlers and tusks and bones into spearpoints, and the old women made snares from the fibers of puerhu flippers.

Anders and his friends played. Beyond the compound, in the unpacked snow, they built their own miniature houses and stalked shadowy hirvisen with imaginary spears.

The flat, snow-covered tundra stretched as far as they could see, a glowing expanse of ever-changing colors. Argus rested on the southern horizon, moving westward in a low arc, sending out the multihued streaks of light that transformed the snow plain.

Lumisland. It was well named, Anders thought. *Lumipaikka* in the old language: snowland. Land of lights in the one they used now.

It was hard for him to believe that the snow was really white, though he had seen it often enough whenever he took a handful into the house, and on the days when Argus hid behind dark clouds. Those days they stayed inside, he and his sisters, and if his father was out hunting, his mother could not eat or sleep until he arrived home safely.

His father had lost fingertips and toes to the cold. Out on the shore-fast ice where he went for puerhu, winds from the northern glacier could be deadly if one's clothing failed. It was a perilous world, for all its beauty, as even the children knew.

When he was eight, Anders discovered that the world extended beyond the camps. It reached to Satama, on the southern coast, where brown furz tundra showed through the snow, and free-floating chunks of ice studded the shore waters.

The town nestled at the foot of a mountain that had snow only on its back slopes. It had a mud street and ugly, square houses. The patches of snow between the buildings were too dirty to reflect much color, even in the rare intervals when sleety rain did not obscure Argus.

Anders hated it from the first. His father took him to one of the flat-fronted houses with staring eyes where he was to board for the school term. Instead of entering through a protected, upward-sloping tunnel, they climbed open stairs, and they had to wait in the cold in front of a door that seemed to be part of the wall.

The doors he knew were translucent curtains of puerhu gut, and the houses inside had walls and floors covered with hides and soft furs. This one was naked and much too large, and everything in it was strange. His father told him to sit on a hard-backed

stool too high for his dangling legs, while he talked to the man and woman.

They both looked soft and unhealthy: their faces too smooth and too pale, and their clothing too thin to be of any use. His father, though, spoke to them in a tone Anders had never heard him use, as though he were not the master of Ahlwenscamp, but a houseless wanderer who had to somehow win their favor.

"No, we don't want hides," the man said. "We're not a trading post. Money — you've got to pay us in money."

"I didn't know," his father said in the new, meek voice. "Where can I sell them, then?"

"Try the store," the woman said. Her mouth curved as if she were amused. "Store: do you know what it is?"

"Yes, I've been here before," Seppo Ahlwen said. "But I've forgotten — would you show me where?"

She pulled aside a thin covering from one of the great house eyes and pointed. "Just across the street and up." She regarded Anders curiously, with the same odd smile. "The boy can wait here. No point in him going out in that storm."

Wind-driven sleet was blowing in sheets, but Anders feared the house more. "Please, Papa," he begged. "I'll go with you."

In the store, his father was diminished again as the storekeeper sniffed at the pelts. "You're sure they're cured right? Last batch I bought went bad."

Seppo Ahlwen, whose skins were accounted the best in three camps, had to haggle like an old woman with a rancid oil cake that no one wanted. "No, I've got to pay for my boy's board," he pleaded finally. "That won't be enough."

"Another educated grubber, eh?" The storekeeper made a sound of derision. "What's he need it for, up there in that godforsaken snow country? Or are you people fixin' to crawl out, finally, and live like the rest of us? About time, I'd say."

"O.K., then, hell, here's your price." The man added another coin to the pile. He gathered up the furs and put them behind the counter. "Maybe you'd like to take some supplies back to your camp. I've got cornmeal, potatoes, coffee. Maybe your wife'd like one of these sweaters." He held up something soft and colored like the snow. "Bring me more furs, and we can work out a trade."

His father shook his head. "I feed my family. We have what we need."

"Jesus! I heard you people was stubborn! Anyway, I hope the boy makes out all right. It'll be tough for him; I guess you know that."

Seppo grunted, and they left the store. They stood for a moment under the shelter of the porch roof, watching the storm.

"Do I have to stay here, Papa?" Fear

and despair gave Anders the daring to question a decision of his father's.

"I said it."

Anders felt a hand on his shoulder, but it was not the angry pressure he had expected. He drew more courage. "Because you went to the school once, Papa?"

"Partly. But I didn't stay in it long enough. You will. You won't ever be cheated by such as him." Seppo spat in the direction of the door.

They left the porch for the sleet and the slush, but the hand stayed on Anders's shoulder, and the town didn't seem quite as dismal.

Anders shared a room with a boy named Peter Kantonen. Peter was twelve, and came from a camp near enough that he could go home for weekends. He was kind to Anders, but the four-year difference in their ages prevented them from becoming really close. Anders was in the beginning group at school, while Peter could already read and write and do figures.

The school was one large room in its own house. Peter professed not to mind it, but Anders didn't believe him. The desks where they had to sit for long hours were torturous devices, as was the furz-fire stove that kept the room smotheringly hot. The dozen students were all from Satama except Anders and Peter and a girl named Hulda. The three of them, Anders quickly found out, were "snowgrubbers," and fair prey for laughter and pointing fingers:

"Grubber, groober,
Ate a booger,"

and taunts that turned hurtful.

"Snowgrubber, snowgrubber,
Grubba dub dub"

when they concluded with his face pushed into the schoolyard slush.

Anders's whole family, he learned, were grubbers; his whole camp. Mr. Hudson gave them a map lesson, and the world he had known shrank to nothing. There, on the wall, was all of the northern continent of Lumisland: the glacial ice cap, the snow plain, the mountains, the open tundra, and finally the harbor and the city.

Ahlwenscamp was too small to rate even a dot. Anders asked, and everyone laughed, even Peter.

For the next lesson, Mr. Hudson showed a globe that he said was their planet Jaspre. On it, even Lumisland was insignificant. The areas where people lived were colored green, and they were all centered around Friisland in the middle of the globe. Lumisland had a narrow green band on the southern tip, but that was all.

Anders knew the maps were wrong, but this time he kept quiet. The next lesson he dismissed as the kind of fancy that old men wove into tales. It was a chart of the sky, showing suns and other planets where people lived. Mr. Hudson pointed out Terra, which he called the Mother, and almost across the paper, Jaspre and the

star that he said powered Argus. He took everyone outside on a day that was clear and showed them the faint white spot low over the ocean. It was called the real sun, he said; you could see it in Friisland almost as clearly as you could see Argus. Argus was only a satellite, he said, which men had made. With a hundred reflecting eyes, it collected heat and light from the real sun, and beamed it down to Jaspre, which would otherwise be as cold-bitten all over as Lumisland. He used words like *refraction* and *reflection* and *diffraction* to explain the Argus effect on the snow, and when everyone looked blank, recited a jingle: "Argus high, warm sky. Argus low, colored snow."

It made no sense to Anders. Everyone knew that Argus was never overhead, as in the pictures Mr. Hudson showed on a screen. They were supposed to be of Friisland and the other green places on Jaspre — fields and forests and cities that were nothing like Satama. And people — more people than Anders had ever imagined.

He didn't know where the pictures came from, but if the maps were wrong, they could be, too.

"Milo, you used to live in Friishaven," Mr. Hudson said. "Tell the class about it."

Milo Carini's father was the manager of the fish cannery where almost everyone in Satama worked. Milo had pale skin and round eyes, and he was the leader of the boys who tormented Anders. He swaggered to the front of the room, where the screen displayed a wide, busy street and smooth-lined buildings that would dwarf even the cannery or the lodge where the ski tourists stayed.

"That's my street," Milo said. "And this house" — he pointed to the largest building, with the golden dome — "that's mine, where I lived before we came here. That's my groundcar, which I drove myself, and up there — that's my dad's flitter." He smiled smugly. "You got any questions, just ask me."

"Thank you, Milo; that will be enough," Mr. Hudson said.

Milo grinned again and strutted back down the aisle. When he passed Anders, he delivered a short, sharp kick. Mr. Hudson, as usual, didn't see it.

Anders dreamed of fighting Milo. It wasn't Milo's size that deterred him, though Milo was a good head taller and thick with flesh. "You'll get sent home for good if you try it," Peter warned him. "It happened to some grubber kids before you came — that's why there're so few of us in school now."

Apparently it was all right for anyone to fight except grubbers, who had to observe every rule with scrupulous care. Anders felt something in the way Mr. Hudson watched him that made him sure Peter was right; that the teacher would prefer

him not to be there.

Facing his father if he were expelled would be worse for Anders than suffering Milo. So he sat quietly, like Peter and like Hulda of the pinched face and veiled eyes, and made no trouble.

His father came for him at the end of the term. They skied north, over the snow plain that started on the western slope of the mountains. His father was reassuringly unchanged with his snowburned face and shaggy furs, and so was the show once Argus followed them around the last peak. Surrounding them was nothing but silence and cold, shifting color. Shades of violet and lichen green and the faint glitter of gold. Fiery pools in every dimpled indentation. His father's track two swaths of intense blue.

Anders pumped his legs faster to catch up. The cold hurt his throat and chest when he talked, but he tried not to show it. "I can read now, and figure." He searched his father's face for a sign of pleasure.

"So your teacher said." There was none.

At least there was no warning to back off. "Is it enough?" Anders pursued. "Do I have to go back?"

His father didn't answer for the space of so many breaths that Anders began to regret his boldness. "Of course, I didn't mind it," he lied. "Even though that teacher doesn't know so much."

His father finally turned his head. "Go on."

"He didn't even put Ahlwenscamp on his map. And he said that men made Argus, and that there are lands with no snow at all, and — even crazier things. He says we always have to wear something over our eyes when we're out on the snow, or we'll go blind. I'm sure he's never even seen a camp."

"Hmmm." His father studied him through his slitted, heavy-lidded eyes. He slowed his pace. "Am I going too fast for you?"

"No." Anders was surprised, himself, that he was able to keep up. His breathing was no longer labored, and he was so delighted to be back again on the snow that he felt he would never tire. He waggled his skis and churned up a wake of coruscating sparkles, skied backward to watch it, and still caught up with his father.

"Enough of that," Seppo Ahlwen said. "We'll be stopping tonight at Pohjalascamp, and it's a long trek. You'll need all your strength."

Anders felt a prickle that was both excitement and fear. Peter had told him about that camp and about the old woman, Kerttu Pohjala, who was said to be a *noita*. "Will we . . . ," he started to ask, but he saw that his father's mouth was clamped tightly, a sign that the conversation was over.

They stopped twice for hot food — pemmican in melted snow — which Seppo boiled on the folding

stove from his pack. The weather was with them, remaining dry and calm. With Argus in its slow setting undimmed by clouds, they continued to ski over the colors of the rainbow.

Argus was a purple stain on the horizon when they arrived at Pohjalascamp. The compound was not impressive: dirty snow, scattered wrecks of sleds, and a storage tent in poor repair. The dwellings consisted of a single large igloo and two smaller ones.

There was no one outside. Seppo called, and a man came out of the larger house.

"*Paiva.*" The two men exchanged greetings in the old language. Night cold formed ice from Anders's breath, and he stamped his skis.

"No time to be out, eh, boy?" The man's grin even in the half dark revealed a long, snaggled tooth. "Come in; we're housed for the night. There's room for two more."

"Is the old woman still here?" Seppo asked. "Kerttu?"

"Ah, so that's your purpose. *Jo*, she lives over there." He pointed to the more distant of the small igloos.

"We'll see her first," Seppo said. "Then we'll be back."

Anders followed his father. "Is she a *noita*?" he asked.

"You know better than that. Or you should. There are no witches. Kerttu's a little crazy, from the time she lived on the glacier, but she can help folks if they'll let her. She's got healing powers, and she's got the second sight."

The fear prickle returned. "You aren't sick, are you, Papa?"

"No."

"Then why are we going to see her?"

"For you." He smiled at Anders's astonishment. "I thought you might need some healing, after all that poisonous city grub you've been eating."

His father's teasing was the only explanation Anders could get. They stopped outside the squat snowhouse, and Seppo called.

A rasping, low-pitched voice answered. "Come in, Seppo Ahlwen and Anders Ahlwen."

They removed their skis and leaned them against the wall. "How did she know who we were?" Anders whispered.

"I told you." Seppo stepped over the sill and crouched as he passed through the short tunnel. He parted the puerhu curtain and disappeared inside.

Anders followed close behind. In the room a single glowing oilring cast dancing shadows over the face of the old woman who sat cross-legged on a bed of furs. It was a face snowburned almost black; seamed and pitted and with all the signs of age: the mouth sunken, the eyes hidden behind drooping folds of flesh.

She motioned for them to sit. "So, Seppo, you have come back. You still do not believe?" She had a man's voice,

rough and gravelly, as if it had been injured.

"I thought you should see the boy again. The other time, he was only a baby."

"Come here, then." She beckoned to Anders.

He squatted in front of her. She reached out with bony hands and described an arc in the air around him. "Look at me."

Her eyes were pinpoints of light, and as he stared into them, he saw a reflection of all the colors of Argus. He saw, too, not in her eyes but in his own mind, an ice plateau, brilliant under Argus light.

"There is a place on the glacier," she whispered, "where all the colors come together. All the powers of Argus, in one spot, waiting to be taken in."

She moved her hands, making the arc larger, and it seemed to Anders that something inside him swelled, too, and thrummed for release.

She lowered her hands and turned to Seppo. "Nothing is changed."

"I've sent him to school," Seppo said. "I thought perhaps. . . ."

"It would fill his head and drive out the other?" Her laughter was a harsh explosive sound, like the bark of a ketsi.

It ended in a racking cough. She waved her hands, brushing at the air. "Go away, both of you," she croaked between paroxysms. "The school is useless. It would be better for him to go at once to the ice." She turned from them to cough again, gut-wretching spasms that shook her narrow frame.

She continued to show them her back, rocking herself and mumbling words that Anders could not understand.

They left, to Anders's great relief. "She's very ill," Seppo said outside.

"Why can't she make herself well, if she's a healer?" Anders asked. He had many other questions, but he was afraid to voice them.

"Perhaps she's too old," is all that Seppo would say.

Pohjala and his family waited in the big igloo, eager for news from the north — and, to a lesser degree, from Satama. Anders rolled himself into the fur robe he had been given and listened to the talk: a hirvisen herd spotted near First Station, twins born at Lahtiscamp, a blizzard that had kept the northern camps housebound for a week. "I haven't been to Satama for years," Pohjala said. "Is it still as miserable? Mud, rain, snooty people, and too many stoves?"

Anders allowed as it was still the same. No one was interested in hearing about the school, and he found himself drifting off while the talk was going on around him. When he awoke, sometime in the middle of the night, everyone was rolled up and sleeping. He stayed awake listening to the snores, wondering about Kerttu and the odd way she had made him feel.

Her words, too, remained with him, driving away sleep. Saying he should "go to the ice." No one went out on the glacier unless they were slightly mad, like Kerttu. Then they seldom returned.

He knew of the glacier. It had no tundra under it, no lichen for animals to feed on. It had winds that would knock a man off his feet, and crevasses that would swallow him. The colors of Argus were said to be incomparable there, but not even his father, who was the bravest man he knew, would venture there to see them.

He had heard talk of a man from Jalmoscamp who had come back from the glacier so crazed that on a puerhu hunt, he had walked over new ice into the ocean. He had heard other stories, whispered at night, about men who had become cannibal creatures.

It was impossible to think that he would ever go there. He agreed with Kerttu that the school was useless, but the other — it made no sense at all.

His father said nothing more about the visit to Kerttu, not during the entire remainder of the trek home, but Anders could tell that he, too, was troubled. He could feel his father watching him, measuring him, even when they both had their eyes fixed on the shifting colors ahead.

Seppo set a hard pace, for Pohjalascamp had been out of their way, and they still had two days' skiing ahead of them. Anders strained at first to keep up. He would show his father, he determined, panting and pushing.

After a time, however, it became less and less effort. Strength flowed into him as the colors of Argus flowed together before his eyes, and he skimmed as easily as if he were in flight before the wind.

Once he even shot into the lead.

It was this time he felt his father's gaze most strongly, and there was no approval in it. Anders fell back to his old position, wondering at the grim line of his father's mouth. He hadn't expected praise — it wasn't his father's way — but he thought that he might have said something. Perhaps to the effect that now that Anders was so strong and fast, it was time for him to go on his first hunt. Boys not much older than he had gone. Anders could pull a sled with the men; he knew he could. He could throw a spear, and he could keep up with anyone.

But his father said nothing. They sheltered for the night in the snow patrol shed at Second Station. The lodge was full of tourists, and they rose early to avoid the power sleds that screamed and churned gouges in the surface of the snow. Seppo did not light the stove for breakfast; they had a swallow of water from the buried flask, and chewed on strips of jerky that they had kept soft under their clothing. They made Third Station by noon, and turned east. The mountains were low here, with an

easy pass. Anders had no trouble with the climb, and coming down he could see the camp ahead: the rocks and the snowbank with its protruding mounds; the domes more glittering than the one in the school picture. He saw his little sisters playing at the edge of the compound, pulling a toy sled fashioned from a curved piece of bone.

"Bekka! Karin!" he called. "You have a new doll! But that sled — never mind it, Bekka; don't cry. I'll make you a better one when I get there."

"Anders!" His father shouted and poked him with a ski pole. "Stop that! You can't hear them. You can't even see them from here." His jaw was hard again, his face dark.

Anders blinked, and it was true. The camp was still a distant smudge, barely discernible in the wash of late-day colors. "I . . . thought I saw. . . ."

"You imagined it," his father said. He was calmer now. "The light can play tricks like that, especially when you've been out all day."

Anders had seen mirages, too, but this had been different. He did not refute his father, however.

When they skied into the camp, he saw that it had been no trick. Bekka's doll was exactly as he had seen it: a carved ivory head and a dress made from the downy fur of a baby ergip.

His mother hugged him and laughed and cried. She had saved dinner: his favorite fish stew flavored with sinop, and mealcakes from one of her precious sacks. His sisters stared at first, but soon they were climbing all over him as they had always done. It was very late when they spread their furs for sleep.

His mother's voice woke him. "That *noita*! I don't believe a word of what she said. I never have."

"Shhh!" There was stillness again, then his father's whisper. "You can see how he's changed already. He can outski me, and who knows what goes on in his head. No, he has to leave the snow; it's the only way. It was a mistake bringing him home this time, and I won't make it again."

The whispers continued, but Anders pressed his hands to his ears. He couldn't hear any more.

He rolled himself into a tight ball as his world crumbled. His father didn't want him! That was why he had been sent away and the next time it would be for good.

It was unthinkable; unbearable. But it was the truth.

Subsequent days did not prove Anders wrong. His father seldom spoke to him — seldom, in fact, appeared to even see him. The men prepared for a hirvisen hunts, and his uncles and the other fathers schooled their sons in wind patterns, in throwing spears, and in vital target points. Anders hung around and listened, but no one invited him to participate. When they left, the boys hiding their pride and the men their excitement. Anders alone of his cousins and former play-

mates remained with the women and the old men and little children.

He thought he would never get over the shame. His mother cooked treats for him every day even though their stores were low, and called him the "camp protector," but he knew better. Camp outcast was more like it. The hunters returned with three large animals, and he stayed inside during the butchering. Everyone would have a story, he knew; even the lookouts and the shouters who turned the herd. Especially his cousin Karl, who was six months younger than he, and a braggart.

His father came into the igloo. "Help your mother," he said. So Anders had to listen, after all, while he scraped hides with the women.

He stayed behind, too, when the men went to the ocean ice for fish and puerhu. This time, Karl and the younger boys didn't go, but Anders no longer ranged with them over the snow. When he wasn't alone, he spent his time with Bekka and Karin, who delighted in his attention and knew nothing about his change of status.

The men returned, and Seppo announced that it was time for Anders to leave again for Satama. He would not have believed it possible a scant three months ago, but Anders felt as much relief as sadness. His mother clutched him and stroked his face as if she never expected to see him again, and that was a bad moment. But then his father shouted, and there was no kindness in his voice. Anders followed him from the camp without once looking backward.

This time his father accompanied him only as far as Third Station, where Anders was to go on by jetsled to Satama. Seppo's good-byes were short and businesslike: money, and where it would be sent. Letters, if he wished, to Third Station. "I understand, if you do well in the Satama school, there is SEF money — government money — to send you to Friishaven. You must try for it."

Nothing about ever coming home. His father even took his skis, as if to cut off that possibility of return. He hates me, Anders told himself. Even knowing it, he had to hold fast to the thought to keep from disgracing himself with tears.

Anders was alone with the driver until Second Station, when the sled filled with returning snow tourists. He huddled in the end of a rear seat, too miserable to appreciate the new sensation of effortless travel. The fare, he knew, had cost Seppo six ketsi pelts. It must have been important to him, Anders thought. Terribly important, to avoid spending three days in his son's company.

He was in Satama by late afternoon, back in his old room. Peter was not there. He was living at the lodge, his landlady said. He had a job there, and he would not be back in school.

Anders tramped up the hill to see Peter. Satama was just as ugly as be-

fore; the streets as muddy and the sky as gray. The road to Lumisatama Lodge wound up the mountain behind the town, a steep climb even with switchbacks. Rain sheeted in from the ocean before Anders was halfway, and his furs were dripping when he reached the entrance of the lodge.

He was directed to the kitchen, where his former roommate was scrubbing pots from the evening meal. It seemed to Anders that Peter had grown six inches. He was the height of a man, but he still had smooth cheeks that flushed when he saw Anders. "This is just a part of my job," he said at once. "The worst part. As soon as I finish here is the best — I get to help the guide when the guests go out for the late-color skiing." He scrubbed at a last blackened pan, rinsed and dried it, and took off his apron. "Maybe you can come along, if there's room in the sled. The first-timers always need a hand with their skis."

"Well . . . sure." All last year in school, Anders hadn't been out on the snow. It was one reason it had been so bad.

"You wait here — I'll ask." Peter hurried off, and Anders waited nervously by the door.

A man looked in from the adjoining room and beckoned. He had a grubber face, but was wearing Satama snow gear. "You the boy? Come on, then; we're ready to go."

Anders followed him to the porch. Peter was waiting, wearing a new city-type parka. "Pick a pair that fits you," the man said to Anders, indicating the rack of skis. The sled was already loaded, and he and Peter and Anders grabbed handholds and perched precariously outside.

The sled took them through town on slow pulse power, then around the mountain to the slopes and the beginning of the snow plain. It was dry here, and Argus hung shimmering in its final burst of color. The sun-construct was surrounded by three halos: a first full one of deep purple, then a three-quarter one of carmine, and a final half circle of molten gold. On the snow, concentric patterns of like colors spread into the dusk of the north, while underfoot the snow crystals gleamed like miniature jewels.

The tourists gasped and ah'd. They all wore face masks, though there was no wind, and dark wraparound goggles that made Anders wonder how much they could actually see. Anders and Peter helped them secure their skis, and rode herd on the line once the guide led them off.

The line moved slowly at first, and Anders ranged up and down, offering encouragement where it was needed.

Peter skied up to him, masked and goggled like one of the tourists. "Not a bad job, eh?"

"Why are you wearing those?" Anders asked.

Peter adjusted the woolen mask.

"You should, too, unless you want to look like a grubber forever."

"Nothing can change that."

"Sure you can. There's no need to be snowburned. And it makes them" — nodding toward the line of skiers — "less nervous about you. They've heard funny things about grubber eyes."

Anders wasn't sure if he liked this new Peter. "So what happens when you go back to your camp?"

"I'm never going back. Not to live, anyway. Why should I, as long as I can earn my keep here?" Peter dug in his poles and scooted off.

Another outcast, Anders thought. But Peter was apparently a willing one. In school he had always tried to be like the town kids.

Not me, Anders vowed. He had decided it as soon as he was back in the mud of Satama. He would live on the snow again someday, even if he had to start his own camp.

The colors, as always, glowed most brightly just before Argus sank. When Anders looked through Peter's goggles, the colors were dimmed by half. He gave the glasses back hurriedly, unwilling to miss a fraction of the spectacle. As he herded the tourists back to the sled, he felt the colors warm within him, almost as if he were back in Ahlwenscamp in the days when his father had loved him.

Several of the tourists gave him coins, the guide said he could come again. It made the night bearable, back in the hard-walled room.

In school he was in a more advanced group than before, but the lessons were much easier. To escape notice, he pretended to labor over them like everyone else. He could have given perfect answers to every recitation — he knew the questions Mr. Hudson was going to ask before the teacher could even voice them — but again he dissembled.

He never raised his hand. In fact, he seldom spoke at all. Milo Carini still led a grubber-baiting gang, and Anders was careful to do nothing to provoke them. The one time he had reached out to protect himself, he had sent a town boy flying halfway across the snowslushed yard.

It had frightened Anders more than the boy, who was fortunately unhurt. It could have been much worse, Anders knew.

You can see how he's changed already. Anders thought often about his father's words. He returned from skiing each night with his head buzzing, and every day in school it became harder to hold himself back.

Three months into the term, a visitor came to the school. He wore shiny boots and a green uniform — the same Anders had seen in the films Mr. Hudson had been showing with his new machine.

"We have a visitor today from SEF," Mr. Hudson said. He printed the letters on the chalkboard. "Engineering

Corpsman Keefer, from Space Exploratory Forces." The teacher's eyes warned: Best behavior, all of you, if you know what's good for you.

Anders sat up straight, like everyone else in the room. SEF, which gave orders to even the Jasparian High Council!

The corpsman smiled. "This isn't an official inspection. Nothing like that. You can relax, all of you."

No one moved, and Mr. Hudson continued to twist nervous fingers.

Corpsman Keefer took off his helmet and unbuttoned the stiff collar of his jacket. He had curly red hard and a pink-toned friendly face. "I was sent here to ask questions of some of the students, but it had nothing at all to do with schoolwork. No one is being tested."

Mr. Hudson cleared his throat. "I'm sure everyone will cooperate."

The corpsman searched the room with his eyes. "Actually, I want to talk only to those children who come from the snow country. Whose families live there." He studied each face. "You . . . and you." He indicated Hulda and Anders. "You're both snow-grubbers, aren't you?"

Hulda looked down, as she always did, and Anders, too, studied the top of his desk. He could feel the corpsman's perplexity.

"Answer him!" Mr. Hudson said sharply. Eliciting no response, he turned to the visitor. "Yes, they're grubbers. The only two I have this term."

"Is there someplace I could speak to them privately?"

The teacher shrugged. "There's just the one room, as you see." Outside, it was sleeting.

"Then, could I use your desk, and a couple of chairs?" Keefer quickly arranged a semiprivate corner. He beckoned to Hulda and Anders.

"What do you know of the history of Jaspre?" he asked when they were settled.

Neither answered.

"Did you know that your people — the so-called 'grubbers' — were the original settlers?"

Anders finally looked up. "The ones who spoke the old language?"

"Yes. Finnish, it was called. One of the pre-space Terran languages. Your ancestors were here even before Argus went up. Jaspre was considered then to be a hardship colony, and there weren't many takers. But those hardy Finn 'grubbers' stuck it out, and even seemed to like it. When SEF put up Argus and terraformed Friisland, they retreated to Lumisland so they could live the way they were used to. With a present from Argus, of course, that no one had expected — the colored snow.

"Now we're wondering if Argus might have given us another gift as well. We've heard rumors of 'special' people among the grubbers. People with unusual powers. Do either of you know of any?"

Hulda stared impassively at a spot

on the floor. She shook her head.

"And you?" He looked at Anders. "Have you heard of anyone who can see farther than most people — maybe even see into the future? Someone who can tell what others are thinking? Who can heal a wound or move something without lifting a finger? Perhaps only someone who is unusually strong?"

The friendly pink face smiled encouragingly, but behind the smile, Anders saw a scene that chilled him: a stark, white-walled room filled with shiny tables and machines with clicking eyes and wiry tentacles.

It was warning enough. "No," he said. "No one. Not ever."

The SEF corpsman sighed. "Do you suppose I could arrange to visit a camp?"

Anders did not answer, nor did Hulda.

Flushing, the corpsman arose. "That's all," he said, dismissing the two.

"Are they always that uncommunicative?" Anders heard him ask Mr. Hudson.

"Grubbers!" the teacher said.

Anders stared at the black case in his reader, too shaken to even pretend to study. He knew now what he was, and what his father had tried to prevent, and the knowledge washed away a shored-up wall of bitterness.

He was trying to save me, Anders thought. Not from the Friishaven laboratory — his father knew nothing of that — but from the danger he did know: Kerttu's way; the way of the glacier.

Lovingly meant, but futile. Anders knew he could no more escape the snow than he could stop breathing. Nor would he want to. He glanced up at the globe of Jaspre on Mr. Hudson's desk, at the tiny area that was the polar continent of Lumisland. With his other vision, he saw Lumisland glow until it lit up the entire sphere. Whatever awaited him on the glacier, in that nexus where all the colors came together, he would be ready for it and he would welcome it.

He spent the rest of the afternoon designing grubber camps where ice houses gleamed and where lichen and sinop roots flourished under the snow in sheltered, Argus-lit glades. And because he was only nine years old, he also indulged himself in a long-deferred satisfaction — a faster-than-sight bushwhacker spitwad aimed dead center at the back of Milo Carini's head.





Installment 25: *In Which the Specter at the Banquet Takes a Healthy Swig from the Flagon with the Dragon, or Maybe the Chalice from the Palace*

Let us speak of guilty pleasures, and of *outre* nights at the cinema. Of windows nailed shut in the soul, and of dreadful dreams we would pay never to have again. Of winds that blow out of our skulls, carrying with them the sounds of sparrows singing in the eaves of madhouses. Of chocolate decadence, sleek limbs, cheap adventure novels, people we ought not to have anything to do with, and the reflection off the blade.

When I rise at six every morning, and pad into the kitchen naked and still warm from the bed where my wife lies till a decent hour, to begin building my first great mug of Mexican Coatapec or Guatemala Antigua, the first thing I do is turn on the radio to KNX, LA's CBS outlet. And as I spoon in the nutmeg and cardamon, the mortar-and-pestle-ground chocolate from El Popular in East Chicago, Indiana . . . I listen to the doings of my species. I listen to tales from the night before: a fourteen-year-old boy gunned down by *vatos locos* as he walked home from a basketball game; another dead black woman found in a dumpster, possibly the latest victim of the uncatchable South Side Killer; a disgruntled electrician who had been fired by a computer company, who returned with a pump shotgun

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and blew three night shift workers into pieces; a bomb thrown into a crowded bus station in Colombo, Sri Lanka, by Tamil separatists one week after a hundred men, women and children were machinegunned to death on a rural bus: another 156 dead; another fourteen-year-old boy shoots a truck driver on a bet by a playmate; in Soweto township, South Africa, a grenade thrown into a group of police trainees on a parade ground, shredding the face of a young black man.

These are not guilty pleasures of which we speak here.

These are the manifestations of the amateur sporting events my species has enjoyed for at least the last million years. There is nothing secret about these pleasures. They are as openly trumpeted as home run statistics. They are the cold wind that blows from windows in the soul, whose nails have been prised loose, the sash thrown open wide.

The guilty pleasure of violence that intrigues us. Draughts from the flagon with the dragon, filled with the opiate of the human race. The brew that is true.

One is told that if one wishes to survive a rattlesnake's bite, one should imbibe incrementally larger doses of rattler vemon, proceeding from *soupcon* to spoonsful, to build up a tolerance that results in immunity when the snake strikes. If that is so, then why do we not grow inured to violence? Why must we always have more, and more imaginative, cinematic depictions of slaughter? Do I hear a demur from Canton, Illinois? From teenager John D. Payne, who wrote the editor of this magazine urging him to drop my little essays because I'm always bumrapping "his age-group (those between thirteen and nineteen)" which slavers after rip&rend flicks like turkey vultures after carrion? (That's the species that forks out the eyeballs of the carcass first.) I presume I'm getting these psychometric readings from Johnny D. because everyone in "his age-group" in Canton, Illinois puts in a minimum of forty hours a week doing community service, belongs to the 4-H Club, eschews Bud Light and Maui Wowie, and the police force in Canton, Illinois had to be reduced to one septuagenarian on a Schwinn because of lack of youthful indiscretions. Do I hear another wail of pain for a savaged segment of the species? Or is it possible that the age-group that includes Johnny D., the group for whom knife-kill flicks and Spring Break movies are made because that is the group that spends its newspaper route and chore money to *see* such films, is an age-group that does not consider films of excessive mad violence a guilty pleasure, but an openly-stated staple of its intellectual (?) diet?

There *is* a critique of an important new film somewhere in this essay; but let me run one of my little di-

gressions on you . . . as lead-in to that critique. By way of offering Johnny D. and all of his clean-scrubbed, god-fearing Skippy age-group in Canton, Illinois some data that may persuade them their Frank Capra-like town must be a singular, an anomalous Valhalla, free of the horrors that afflict the rest of the nation. And the digression is this:

On Wednesday, March 27, 1985, at about four in the afternoon, I drove off the CBS Studio Center lot where we'd been filming *The Twilight Zone* — one sort of world in which I live from time to time — and entered the *real* twilight zone. I had been asked (as it turned out, I'd been conned) to speak to the inmates of Central Juvenile Hall. Anybody under eighteen who had committed a crime in Los Angeles serious enough to have drawn time inside, was to be my audience. About seven hundred boys, I'd been told by the "recreation director," name of Ford. It seemed weird to me . . . to be asked to come and lecture kids that age . . . for the most part hardcases convicted of everything from shoplifting to aggravated assault to manslaughter. It had been years since I'd worked with juvenile delinquents, and though I'd spoken at joints where the population had been adults pulling hard time, this was a situation that somehow didn't parse.

Central Juvie, as they call it, is located at the ass-end of nowhere on Eastlake Avenue down in the center of the old city. It is like every other grand slam I've ever entered — big, square, squat and ominous — as much iron and concrete as you'd ever want to be inside — and though Ford was pleasant enough, I soon realized I'd been jobbed by one of the kids working as trusty for him. This kid, unlike all the others I encountered that evening, had been remanded for boosting thousands of dollars' worth of computer equipment; a kid from an upper-class family in the posh Pacific Palisades section of L.A. He was a con man of the first order, and he had been reading my books, and had decided that meeting me would be a nice break in his otherwise boring routine. So he'd lied when he'd called me, telling me that he was an assistant recreation director; he'd lied when he'd told me that the staff had asked him to contact me as part of their "recreation" program; he'd lied when he'd told me the kids were big fans of my work and were anxious to hear what I might have to say about this'n'-that.

But I was in it before I figured out that I'd been hustled. (Remember: your brain never outgrows its need to have games run on it.)

I had imagined it would be one session of talking to the few inmates who gave a damn that a live human being had come in to take up the slack of their empty hours, but I soon found out that it would be three separate encounters. The older kids were as-

sembled at one time, the younger at another, and a third off-the-cuff presentation after I'd had dinner with them. Jail food is no better now than it was years ago when I'd been compelled to eat it.

All went fairly well through the first two meetings. There were mostly trustys at the dinner thing. And the younger kids in the second get-together responded well enough to anecdotes about old gang days in Brooklyn and running away from home and staying smart enough to avoid people who'd skin you . . . the kind of bullshit a fifty-year-old man hopes won't bore a ten-year-old kid serving time for bludgeoning an eighty-year-old woman for her social security money and food stamps. I don't fool myself that I was of any value beyond distraction of the same sort that could be provided by watching a mouse work on a slice of Wonder Bread. All I wanted to accomplish — after I got hip to what was *really* happening — was to recount enough anecdotes not to bore the ass off them. It went fairly well.

Then came the session for the older boys who had been fed on the second shift, who had been given the head 'em up, move 'em out treatment through the showers, and who had been *ordered* to attend the evening's festivities. Under the direction of guards with billy clubs — evident but not used — seventy or so teenaged boys were herded into a large day-room with chairs set up around the perimeter. My chair was in the center of the ring.

They looked at me as if I'd come from Mars. Or Beverly Hills. The latter no more alien than the former to street kids from Watts and the *barrio*. I confess to trepidation: only twice, in all the times I have been inside the joint as a visitor, have I felt fear. Once, on a journey to Death Row at San Quentin (about which I've written elsewhere) . . . and at Central Juvie that evening, surrounded by kids as cold and mean as any I've ever been around. These were children who had killed, raped, set fires that incinerated whole families; who had been in *pachuco* street gangs since they could walk, who had been heavy dopers since they could swallow, who had discovered just how crummy the world can be for those the city pretends don't exist. (Not knee-jerk Liberalism, only pragmatic observation.) Few of them could read anything beyond the level of comic books, all of them came with a freightload of anger and distrust that could be physically felt. They sat there, under the gaze of the guards, waiting and watching this Martian from Beverly Hills.

I'd sent on ahead, earlier that week, a carton of paperbacks. Fifty mint copies of MEMOS FROM PURGATORY, a book I'd written about gangs, and about being in jail. So now, seeing the veil that hung between me and my "audience," I asked one of the guards

if the books had been given to the kids. (Hoping, I suppose, that the reality of holding a book in one's hands would lend some credibility to the person sitting in front of them.)

All the boys looked at one of the guards, a man who seemed to be in charge. He looked chagrined for a moment, then muttered that the box had been kept in the office. I got the immediate message that those books had been picked over by the staff, and if the occasion presented itself to reward one of the inmates, a paperback book might be liberated from the cache.

I said, "Well, I'll tell you what: let's haul that box out and we'll pass around some books so these guys know I'm at least what I say I am."

There was a moment's hesitation. The guard was clearly not overjoyed with my suggestion. But there wasn't much he could do about it. Not in front of seventy pairs of eyes watching to see where the control was going to come to rest.

He nodded to the guard nearest the door, and he left. In a few minutes the box had been *shlepped* in, and set at my feet. It had been opened. Ten or fifteen copies were gone. I asked the boy nearest me to assist, and we handed out as many of the books as remained. I gave them a few minutes to examine the artifacts, and then the weirdness that prompts this digression began.

"Hey, man," one of the kids said, turning the book over and over in his hands, "What is this?"

I thought he was kidding. "It's a book. I wrote it."

"No it ain't," he said.

"Like hell," I said. "It's my book . . . I wrote it."

"How do I know that?"

"Because it's got my name on the front cover, bigger than the title."

"The what?"

"The title. The name of the book."

"Where's that?"

I realized at that point that he wasn't hosing me. He had no idea what a title was, and maybe couldn't even read it — or my name — if he *did* understand which was which.

I got up and walked across the big circle to him. The others watched, still holding their copies as if they were plates of something wet and slippery they'd been ordered to eat. I leaned over the kid and pointed to my name. "See that. 'Harlan Ellison.' That's me."

"How come?"

"Because I wrote it."

"What 'cha mean, you wrote it? You wrote this?" And his finger pointed to the letters that made up my name above the title. It took me a moment to understand that he thought I'd been saying I'd written *those two words*. "No," I said, very carefully, riffling the pages of the book he held, "I wrote all of this. Every word in here."

"Get outta town!" he said, and I

could see other boys in their chairs also riffling the pages, as if they'd never examined a book this close up in their lives. He didn't believe me.

"I'm not kidding," I said. "This's what I do for a living. I write books and movies and tv."

He looked at me with the look that says *you got to open the sack before I'll believe there's a cat in there.* "How do I know that's you?"

I turned the book over. My picture was on the back cover. That should do it. "That's me," I said.

He looked closely at me, hovering over him, then he looked at the photo again. "No, it ain't."

Kafka had programmed the evening. "Sure it is," I said, "look at it . . . that's me . . . can't you see it?"

"No it ain't," he said. "This guy ain't wearin' no glasses."

Miguel De Unamuno once wrote: "In order to attain the impossible one must attempt the absurd."

I took off my glasses. "They took that picture of me about five years ago," I said. "It's me. Look close." He looked, and looked back, and looked at the photo again; and reluctantly he decided I wasn't lying to make myself a big man. Then he riffled the pages again. "You wrote all this in here?"

I nodded. "Can you read it?"

He got cold and angry. "Yeah. I can, if I want to."

I didn't push it.

But when I returned to my chair, with most of them still holding the books as if they didn't know what to do with such alien objects, one of them yelled across the room, "You write movies?"

"Yeah, And the stuff you see on teevee," I said, thankful for *any* point of entry.

And here's where the digression ties in.

Another kid yelled, "You write that *Friday the Thirteen, Part Two*?"

"No," I said, smiling, not knowing what was about to transpire, "I don't like movies where people get stuck with icepicks. I don't even *go* to that kind of—

(What an asshole, Ellison! Don't just put in the time and make the best of a bum deal, don't just try to keep them distracted for an hour, be a hotshot: give 'em a moral! Jeezus, what a nitwit, Ellison! Go get your brain lubed.)

I may still have been speaking, but they didn't hear it. They were now yelling back and forth to one another. They were, for the first time, animated, interested, excited. And here's what they were saying:

"Oh, yeah, man, didju see that part where the woman gets the axe in her back?"

"Yeah, that was cool. She wuz crawlin', 'cross the floor, an' the guy was cuttin' on her!"

"That was okay, but you see that one where the guy stuck that bitch through the mouth with the power drill an' the guy who's comin' to save

her sees the drill come down through the ceiling upstairs?!!!"

"Oooh, *yeah*! That was cool . . . but didju see. . . ."

How, I wondered insanely, could he remember which part movie of the *Friday the 13th* series it had been?

I tried shouting into that maelstrom of voices. Almost every kid in the room was enthusiastically recounting his favorite slaughter scene to some kid sitting in the circle. And their voices rose and rose in the cage, and they got into it, warmed it in their mouths, relishing every nuance, recounting every cinematic trick that had been used to hook them — squirting eyeballs, faces ripped away in bloody strips, limbs torn off but still quivering, the stroke of the muscled arm as the razor came away festooned. And on, and on, and on. . . .

When I left Central Juvie, the recreation director Ford, having had an evening of recreation, took pleasure in my stunned condition. The nice white boy from showbiz looked as if he'd been gutted. He thanked me prettily for donating my valuable oh so valuable time to these deserving unfortunates; and he smiled straight and hard and with obvious amusement into my look of horror; and I stumbled out into the lightless, empty parking lot, got into my car, dropped my keys, fumbled in the darkness for them, and got out of there as if the demons of hell were after me.

Not for the first time did I cast back in memory to the time Bob Heinlein described to me the horror he had felt when he'd learned that Charlie Manson adored STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND, thought of it as his bible, and had named his child Valentine Michael Smith. But for the first time I *knew* how Bob had felt. For the first time, in all the times I had had that intellectual discussion with myself and others about the responsibility of what a writer writes, was I frozen at the point of knowledge that yes, maybe, yes, what we write has a demonstrable effect on *them*.

Don't ask me, please, to identify "them." I mean the *them* who go to see larger-than-life-size mayhem on the silver screen and think of those fantasies of gore as templates for reality.

These films that teenagers go to see so avidly. These films that make boxoffice millions from ticket sales to teenagers. These films that John D. Payne of Canton, Illinois tells me "his age-group" does not condone, if I read the psychometric messages correctly.

These secret icons. These guilty pleasures.

No, I'm not talking about *those* guilty pleasures. At least, I don't think I am. What I'm talking about, is secretly loving the films of Ken Russell, the way you secretly love Baby Ruth bars and *Gilligan's Island* reruns, and won't cop to such love in open court.

I think what I'm talking about is admiring and secretly loving the violence and ruthlessness in Ken Russell's films, brought to these pages now on the release of Russell's latest film, *GOTHIC* (Virgin Vision and Vestron Pictures).

Ken Russell. Where do I begin. . . .

Once I wrote that, in my view, there were only seven genius-level directors currently working in film. Just seven. That is, *Directors*. Unmistakable talents of the highest order of Art. I named them: Altman, Coppola, Fellini, Kurosawa, Resnais, Kubrick and (then alive) Buñuel. I hastened to add that this list was not intended to denigrate the work of other directors, merely that I saw all the others as *craftspersons*. As creative intellects of greater or lesser ability — from, say, Woody Allen and David Cronenberg and Ron Howard above, to Brian De Palma and Frank Perry post-1974 and Alan Rudolph (always) below. (Not to mention Richard Lang, Mark L. Lester and Joe Zito, from whom all is dross and chaff.)

I fudged the list. I was reluctant to endanger the credibility of that list of seven by including Ken Russell. But if my definition of *directorial genius* is the one by which my opinions stand or fall, then Russell makes that short list, despite his lunacy and colossal pratfalls, his mind-boggling gaffes and infantile obsessions.

(Definition: the genius director is one whose work bears little or no resonance of any predecessor; whose work is so determinedly *his* that even if you walk in during the middle of the film, you can look up and say, "Fellini" or "Kurosawa"; whose work is never safe, never calm, never predictable; whose work never elicits the phrase, as one leaves the theater, "That was a nice film." Examples: *Providence*; *Paths of Glory*; *Dersu Uzala*; *The Godfather, Part Two*; *La Strada*; *McCabe and Mrs. Miller*; *Los Olvidados*.)

There is no other Fellini, no other Kubrick, no other Kurosawa. Try to think of one. Try to fit any others into all the points of that compass. Some come close. Some may yet reach that Apennine headiness of individuality. Most will, at best, only get as staggeringly superlative as Capra or Ford or Von Stroheim or Wilder at their breathtaking best. That is not, as you can see, chopped liver.

But there is a craziness, a disregard for approbation, a dismissal of posterity, a dangerous recklessness in those seven and in Ken Russell (and in Orson Welles), that sets them above and apart. In my view.

Notwithstanding all of the preceding, no one will hit me with a brick if I name the seven and say they can't be touched; but let me add that guilty pleasure Ken Russell, and all of my well-ordered theorizing crumbles. Laughter begins. People will point their fingers and then make circular motions with that finger alongside

their ear. They will stare and wonder how anyone who admires Kurosawa can even *tolerate* the blatancy, the gagging bad taste, the r*idic*ulousness of Ken Russell! I mean, fer pete's sake, do you remember that idiotic scene in *The Music Lovers* when Russell accompanied the cannons in the "1812 Overture" with the heads being blown off mannequins bearing the visages of characters from Tchaikovsky's life? Come *on*! That was sophomoric . . . no, hell, it was downright dopey!

Hold the brick.

Yes, that was downright dopey. And in *every* Ken Russell film there is dopiness; pure Howdy Doody time. And there is excess. And there is bad taste. And there is imagery gone bugfuck. And there are performances by actors who seem to have dined *al fresco* on jimson weed.

But in that same film, *The Music Lovers*, Ken Russell put on celluloid the single most frightening cinematic image I can remember in nearly fifty years of moviegoing. (Because the morbidly curious will demand I specify, I will recount it here for you. If you are easily shocked, or even if you are hard to shock, I urge you to skip to the paragraph below beginning with the big bullet: • I am not being facetious. There is no coy duplicity in my warning. I am not trying to titillate you with a "guilty pleasure." What I will describe rocked even me when I saw it; the theater audience with whom I shared the raw experience was moved in large numbers to depart the screening. You have been alerted. Read on if you wish, but don't send one of those outraged letters to the Noble Ferman Editors; if you remained, it was free choice.)

In *The Music Lovers*, a bizarre film biography of Pëtr Ilich Tchaikovsky that distorts historical fact and the flow of the composer's real life to Russell's nefarious ends, we are presented with an encounter in the open yard of a madhouse between Tchaikovsky's nymphomaniac wife, Antonina Milyukova, and her mother. Nina (who actually only lived with Tchaikovsky for a few weeks) has been consigned to bedlam by the mother who, in the film, is portrayed as a monster who has pimped her daughter to well-heeled gentlemen in Moscow. Nina is so far gone into lunacy that the mother presents these callers (who have been told they can fuck "Tchaikovsky's wife" for a few rubles) as "Rimsky-Korsakov," "Mussorgsky," "Borodin." Nina has already slipped so far into suicidal psychosis that she accepts the duplicitous fantasy, and becomes a merchandised sex object for her mother's gain. She contracts syphilis, goes completely out of her head, and is sent to the institution. (In fact, this happened three years after Tchaikovsky's death, but Russell uses it to his own purposes as having happened while Tchaikovsky was still a youngish man.)

The mother, decked out in rare plumage, silks and a haughty manner, comes to see her daughter. Nina, played by Glenda Jackson, joins her in the exercise yard. All around we see barred windows and grates set into the ground, and from these cell openings, we see hands and scabrous arms reaching, reaching, imploring. Jammed into every cell in this awful place are those the 19th century chose to lock away rather than attempt to understand and cure. The screams. The wails of the damned. It is as flamboyant and sickeningly sensual as Russell has ever been. Nina is covered with running sores, her eyes red-rimmed and lit with the fire of lunacy. She wears a gray rough-cloth shift that billows around her feet.

They have a conversation that only faintly touches on reality. And at the end of the chat, Nina wanders coquettishly toward one of the grates in the cobblestones, from which hands reach, from which fingers writhe like fat white worms, against which faces of demented men are pressed, their rheumy eyes shining out like those of rats in a sewer.

And with the grace of a royal courtesan, Nina begins to lower herself onto the grating, thighs wide, bending at the knees, settling down like an ashy flower, shift spread wide around her to cover the grate. She settles down till she is pressed to the grate, naked beneath her garment; and as the mother (and we) watch in disbelief, we hear the slurping, sucking sounds of those diseased madmen working at the secret places of Tchaikovsky's mad wife.

• To those rejoining us, relax: you're safe now. For those who traveled through the preceding four paragraphs with me. I cannot apologize for having demonstrated my eloquent *gueule* — which translate from the French roughly, as "bad mouth." As George Orwell once pointed out, "There are some situations from which one can only escape by acting like a devil or a madman." Real Art has the capacity to make us nervous. In my view, that scene is Real Art. Twisted, depraved, wildly disturbing Art, but Real Art nonetheless. It is the essence of Russell's raw power to capture something infinitely darker in the human psyche than Lovecraft at his most beguiling. I cannot apologize for exposing you to Art, no matter how deeply it distresses either of us. It is important, if you are to understand why I perceive Russell as a Great Director, that specifics be tendered.

For all of his shenanigans and his belly-whoppers, Ken Russell uses film to look at things we not only don't care to see, but to look at things we don't even imagine exist!

Does that not lie near to the burning center of what we seek in fantasy literature? The unknowable. The inexplicable. The monstrous that abides in sweet humanity. Is it not what we see corrupted and ineptly proffered

by the slasher-film directors? Does it not tear at our perceptions in ways that treacly abominations like *Short Circuit* and *Gremlins* cannot?

So here we have Russell's vision of that single night — June 16th, 1816 — in the Villa Diodati near Geneva, Switzerland; a night on the shores of Lac Leman in which the opium addicted poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, in the company of his lover, Mary Godwin, her wild half-sister Claire, Dr. Polidori, and their cruelly jesting host Lord Byron, experience the debauchery and reckless mind-games that will one day produce Polidori's *The Vampyre* (from which, authorities argue, *Dracula* and the genre of horror fiction as we know it, proceeds) and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

In fact, the session went on among these five for an entire summer; but Russell gives us a night of storm and drugs and sex and terror and frenetic submission to the moist and gagging secret fears that encapsulates for dramatic effect, all that transpired during that legendary encounter.

The film has the surrealistic feel of such classics as Arrabal's 1970 *Viva la Muerte* (*Hurrah for Death*), Buñuel and Dali's 1928 *Un Chien Andalou* and Jean Cocteau's 1950 *Orphée*. Mark my caution: this is nowhere near being in a class with such great films, but it has the same *sensibility*. Images flash and burn and flee almost before we have had the moment to set them correctly into the jigsaw. An attack by a suit of armor culminates in the helmet's visor being thrown up to reveal a face of raw meat writhing with leeches. A painting on a wall, representative of the work of Henry Fuseli, showing a troggish demon astride the naked body of an houri, comes to life and Mary sees herself as the violated victim. It is an Odilon Redon nightmare come to the tender membrane of sanity and clawing its way into the real world. It is redolent with symbolism.

Much of that symbolism is ludicrous: Miriam Cyr as Claire, in a laudunum-induced vision as perceived by Shelley, bares her breasts, and in place of nipples there are staring eyes . . . which blink at him. The audience roars with laughter. Russell has overindulged his adolescent fantasies.

And this excess, ultimately, undermines the film. What was there to be discovered, is revealed at last to be the silliness and self-indulgence of people we find foolish and vain and empty. As Mary Godwin and Lord Byron and Polidori and Shelley were not. Like a child trying too hard to get the attention of adults, finally pissing on the living room carpet, Russell's conceit shreds itself with its strumpet-painted nails. It is too diffuse, too bizarre, too distorted to be taken seriously.

By presenting the accumulated phantasms of a summer in one night's grisly carrying-on, Russell has reduced the premier idea of a horror film to

the level of Bogdanovich's *What's Up, Doc?* — a running, jumping and standing still charade; the shipboard stateroom scene from the Marx Bros.' *A Night at the Opera.* Distorted closeups like parodies shot from Sergio Leone westerns. Icons of slime, rats, ichor, cobwebs, dirt, meat, blood, water. Gothic? No, more precisely, rococo; grotesquerie piled on grotesquerie without pause, without release, without a moment for reflection. Formless, over the top, obsessively goofy . . . such screaming and running around and eye-rolling that we perceive the film as one cacophonous shriek. While at the same time it takes itself so seriously we feel we must laugh behind our hand. And all of this played out to Thomas Dolby's molar-grinding electronic score. Whatever happened to real symphony orchestras, playing scores by Waxman and Newman and Rosza, as background for "big" pictures such as this?

No one in his or her right mind could truly be said to "like" this film, for in this film no one is in his or her right mind; and so we have no place to moor our sympathy.

At final consideration, *Gothic* is loopy and fatally flawed and an aberration.

Yet I treasure this film. So may you. If you, as am I, are out of your head . . . you will cleave to this tortured bit of cinematic epilepsy bycause it is *alive.* It is yet another crime of passion committed by Ken Russell, and his sort of berserk creativity has fallen on such hard times in this age of Reagan and yuppie sensibility, that simply to be exposed to the ravings of an inspired madman is cathartic.

I came away from *Gothic* with my soul on fire.

It drove me to this essay, all 5000+ words of it.

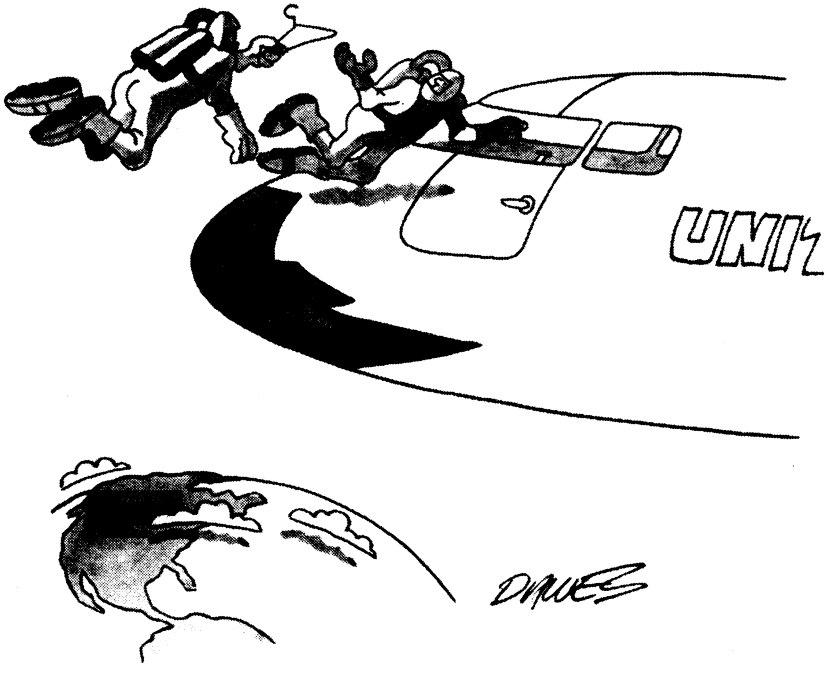
Back to the Future had no such effect on me. Nor have any of the hundred or so films I've seen in the last six months had anything remotely like that effect. We live in a time of "safe" art that is noway art, but merely artifice. *Gothic* frightens, after the fact, because it is dangerously conceived, impudently mounted, uncaring of its footing, determined to crawl the wall or tumble into the abyss, all in the name of disgorging the absurd demon in the thought.

I cannot in conscience recommend *Gothic* to anyone. You would no doubt lynch me. But I tell you this: for every teenager in Canton, Illinois who would have us believe his "age-group" is free of potential slashers, there are a hundred slashers-in-waiting within the bedlam cells of our natures to populate a Lovecraftian duchy; for every insipid film that rakes in millions by offering 1980s visions of floating ethics and looking out for #1, there are greedyguts viewers who see such films as a license to indulge moral turpitude; and for every

nut-case like your faithful columnist, who tells you to embrace a wonky failure like *Gothic* because a pulse beats in it, a pulse that signifies life means more than what one finds confined to the screen of a tv set, there will be legions who tell you disorder is chaos, riot is recklessness, art is quantifiable.

The final assertion of critical judgment on *Gothic* is not whether or not it is good, or whether one likes it or not. The undeniable truth of *Gothic*, as in all the work of Ken Russell (an artist who is either so mad or so foolhardy as not to care if he wins or loses), is that it is palpably *alive*. It is riot and ruin and pandemonium. But it will have you by the nerve-ends.

And isn't that what Real Art is supposed to do? Even in Canton, Illinois?



In which a cop, obsessed with the mysterious disappearance of a killer, sets up the strangest kind of vigil . . .

Waswolf

BY
EDWARD WELLEN

(With thanks to Charles G. Waugh)

Bain melted the dimes and quarters in a crucible, then ladled the molten metal . . . saw flow from form to morph in a smoothly twisting stream . . . into bullet molds. While the bullets cooled, Bain packed a good charge of powder into cartridges and cleaned and oiled his service .38. When he could handle the bullets, he fitted them into the cartridges and crimped them in place, then loaded the rounds into the chambers of the .38's cylinder. It was only when the wolf jumped the six-foot-high cyclone fence to get at the bitch in heat that Bain, stepping between and leveling his gun, remembered the silver content of the clad coins of these days was next to nil.

Sticky with sweat, Bain awoke from the same nightmare to the same real world. What he could see of the sky through his window seemed bright enough, but he had the sense of thunderheads lurking just beyond the fleecy shapeshifting clouds.

He took his time getting out of bed. No sudden moves. He was aging and had learned that rising too quickly left the blood behind, made him black out.

He listened to the radio that had wakened him. The announcer, giving a cold reading of hot news, stumbled over foreign place-names. Made no difference; when it came to human-made and human-suffered catastrophes, countries were interchangeable.

Bain shoved slowly to his feet. Straightened up, stooped. Bain tried to smile, but his face felt stiff. Nothing to laugh at as long as the task he had set himself stayed unfinished.

He had solved the case years ago, but never resolved it — and now his flesh, his bones, his very soul, were telling him not all that much time remained to him if he were to bring the culprit to justice.

Time. The thought passed over him like the shadow of a bird.

High hysterics on the part of the radio, a voice announcing the sale of appliances at unbelievable prices, brought Bain into the here and now with a shiver. Bain snapped off the sound and smiled sourly. He believed the voice when the voice said unbelievable.

Lots of things, maybe even most things, were unbelievable. Even Bain's own inner voice could be unbelievable.

After eighteen unrewarding years of watching the Lupescus and their dog, eighteen fruitless years of spying on them from just across the fence, eighteen wasted years of looking for some telltale sign, some giveaway slip, some momentary lapse, Bain could no longer swear to what he believed.

He put himself on the stand — had his personality started to split along the grain? — and examined himself crossly. *Do you mean to tell this court that after all these years, you can be sure you saw what you say you saw? Remember, you're under oath.*

Bain remembered the suddenly ravaged faces of the Lupescus. He could look back and see them age a decade in the ten minutes it took him to convince them he wanted their son for rape and murder. And yet he had read something more than, or something other than, fear in their eyes. He had read a sorrowful yet prideful look of complicity. That shared look said plainly that they felt sure their son was safe from harm.

Holding their heads high, they let him search their house from attic to cellar without a warrant. They had nothing to hide, they said, and they stood passively and quietly by, petting and soothing their dog that snarled and would have snapped at the intruders, while Bain and his partner all but tore the house apart for hiding places and ransacked the rooms for clues. True, the Lupescus seemed shaken when Bain showed them the murder weapon came from their carving set, and their faces went stony when he turned up bloodstained shirt and semen-stiffened pants in a hamper. But they clung to one another — and to their stubborn and almost gloating certainty about their son's immunity from prosecution, even if they no longer asserted his guiltlessness.

There was no question in Bain's mind he had found, or at least followed, the perp. The patrol car had surprised the rapist finishing off his victim with a knife, frozen him in the spotlight for an instant, then given hot pursuit when he took off down the alley. Bain, lighter and quicker back then, chased him on foot, over fences

and through hedges, crookedly straight to the Lupescus house. And there the perp vanished. Bain saw the youth drop the knife to climb the oak in the backyard, watched him leap through an open window into what turned out to be Val Lupsecus' bedroom. At that very instant, Bain's partner, clued by Bain's walkie-talkie, pulled up in front. Almost immediately other cars and officers responding to the broadcast squeal surrounded the block and sealed off the area. So where Val vanished to puzzled Bain.

The Lupescus stood with their bristling dog and watched the search substantiate Val Lupescus' disappearance into pale moonbeamish air. To Bain's eye, the animal looked more wolf than dog.

Bain remembered the shock when he first glimpsed the malevolent intelligence in the topaz eyes. He remembered putting his sweaty hand on the grip of the service .38 in his holster, his fingers itching for the beast to go from fangy growl to flowing leap, remembered raising his chin, his bared throat inviting the beast to spring.

But the dog smiled, though Bain made out red hunger back of its jaws, and held itself tightly still. Not till later, once the impossible thought lodged in Bain's mind, did Bain think to check with the neighbor on the right — the house on the left was vacant and up for sale — whether the Lupescus ***had*** a dog. The woman seemed half-blind and half-deaf and would have been wholly useless on the witness stand, but she did say she couldn't say as she'd ever seen or heard a dog on the Lupescus' premises. By the time a few days later when Bain asked the Lupescus where was the dog's collar and its leash and where was its license, the dog sported a collar and a tag that said its name was Fire — although the Lupescus pronounced it Fear-a — and the Lupescus produced the receipt for a paid-up license.

That left Bain with a crazy theory he didn't dare voice. Didn't mean he didn't dare follow it up. But he had to follow it up on his own time and in secret.

Secret at least from his bosses, who seemed satisfied the department had done its duty by putting out an all-points bulletin on Val Lupescus — age fifteen, height five feet ten inches, weight 150, pale complexion, dark hair, topaz eyes — and by following up with wanted posters. As soon as the story died in the media, the department seemed content to let the case folder gather dust, and crumble to the same, in the inactive files. Bain's chief, the one time Bain tried to convince him to keep it open, shrugged and said the Lupescus kid was bound to come to a bad end in the world of runaways; one way or another, Val would get what he had coming to him.

Not secret from the Lupescus; Bain

wished them to know he was still and always after Val, for only by rattling them or wearing them down could he prove his crazy theory.

Bain felt so strongly about it, so driven to show himself he hadn't gone wacko, so determined to make Val pay for the crime, that he took early retirement and moved not to the Gulf-fishing Florida of his dreams but to the house to the left of the Lupescus. Bain had lived alone ever since his wife walked out on him and got the divorce he never fully understood her reasons for wanting, and he had no one but himself to answer to.

In the radio's silence, Bain heard the Lupescus' car start up and pull out of their gravel drive. He padded to the window to see who-all was aboard. Sometimes they took Fire; sometimes they didn't. When they did, Bain would tail them in his own jalopy; when they left Fire home, Bain, too would stay home and use the absence of the supportive parents to torment Fire to the utmost.

This morning the parents went alone. Sometimes they were cute and seemed to be alone, but Fire crouched on the floor in the back. This morning, though, Bain caught sight of Fire stretched up to stare out the parlor window at the car shaking the gravel from its tires and vanishing down the street. Dust hung in the air; no breeze and another hot one.

Bain rubbed his facial bristle but decided against shaving even though he'd feel cooler without it. Used to be, while he was on the force, he had to shave twice a day and yet still powder to mask the bluish look. Now his beard had grayed so he could get by with shaving every other day.

He put on pants that had long since lost their permanent press, and let his shirt hang over his waistline to hide the zipper-exposing give of seams at the top of the fly. From the dresser top he picked up and distributed in his pockets his key chain with the dog whistle fastened to it, a few sheets of facial tissue, his billfold and handful of change, and the police shield and service revolver he had hung on to. He went to the kitchen for a six-pack of beer from the refrigerator and carried the six-pack out onto the front porch.

Everything about him seemed heavy — heavy features, heavy build, heavy walk. He made for the fraying wicker chair and seated himself heavily, as though tired. Then he faced the Lupescus house and came to life, at least in the eyes. He switched on the portable fan to waft his scent toward the Lupescus house.

Fire must've had warning before that, must surely have heard the screen door squeak and the floorboards groan, but stayed stretched and immobile, as though posing for a portrait of man's best friend awaiting man's return home. Now he slowly turned his head to meet Bain's gaze.

Bain popped a top and chuga-

lugged, crushed the empty in his hand, and made suddenly to hurl it at the window Fire looked out of.

Fire didn't twist away. Stayed put and just kept looking straight at Bain.

Not that Bain had expected anything else. Damn monster knew Bain knew better than to lay himself open to a charge of malicious mischief. Bain had taken care all these years to stay within the law — or at least to restrict breaches of the law to measures only Fire could testify to only if Fire transformed back to Val. Measures such as blowing the dog whistle with its sounds above human range.

Bain let the empty fall to the porch floor. He drew out the dog whistle on his key chain, made a swipe at his mouth with the back of his hand, and put the whistle to his lips.

Now Fire twisted away from the window and dropped out of sight. This Bain had expected. Bain was never sure exactly where the sound drove Fire, under a bed or deep into a closet, but he felt sure it did drive Fire mad. The howling told him so.

If Bain had not been the cause of it, the howling would have been enough to drive Bain mad. But he was in control of it and could make it keep up long past what otherwise would have been his own limit of endurance.

The howling had been bad enough for the half-deaf woman who lived on the other side of the Lupescus to complain to the cops and the S.P.C.A. about, blaming the Lupescus for neglecting or mistreating their newly acquired pet; nobody but Bain and Fire — and maybe the Lupescus — knew of Bain's hand in it, Bain laying off whenever anyone came next door to investigate. But that was in the beginning; the neighbor woman had died ten years ago, and the couple who bought her house were away at work during the hours Bain blew the whistle and Fire howled.

These days, as right now, Bain blew it more out of habit than in hope. Give the son of a bitch credit, Fire had never let the torment drive him out of his shape — force him from dog form and dog hearing — at least so far as Bain knew. A few more blasts now, then Bain let up for the time being.

He had worked the six-pack down to zero by the time the newsboy rode by sailing papers onto the lawns. Bain waited for the next part of the ritual. Anyone who didn't know what Bain knew would have thought only that the Lupescus had trained their dog well.

Fire exited the house through the swinging panel cut into the lower half of the front door. With side glances Bain's way, Fire trotted to the paper, picked it up in his jaws, and headed back for the door.

Bain pushed to his feet and moved to the porch railing nearest the fence. "Hold it, Val. Come here to the fence. I want to talk to you."

The dog did not pause.

Bain's voice took on a hard edge. "Want me to blow the whistle some more?"

Fire veered, and stalked stiff-legged toward the fence.

"That's a *good* boy." Bain bared his teeth in a grin. "Like to go for my throat, wouldn't you?" Bain half-hoped that the dog would try just that. He knew, though, there was little likelihood. The fence stood too high for a dog — or even a wolf — to overleap. But it would have been satisfying to see Fire try. Bain's hand in his pocket was on his gun. God, to be able to say, "Nice try!" and shoot. End this the right way once and for all.

Fire stood still, but the vise of his jaws tightened on the paper.

Bain grimaced and shook his head. "When you going to give it up and change back? I have to say I never thought you'd stick it out this long. Maybe if I could've seen this far down the road, I might not've started this —what? dogging you? hounding you?" He chuckled. "Good, huh? Yeah, wolf, you can't keep me from your door." He shook his head to clear it for what he meant to say. "But what I called you over for was, don't you think it's time we had it out?" He grew earnest. "Right now, before your folks come home from shopping — aren't you sick of those cans of dog food and the flea collars? Right now, while it's just between the two of us, can't you be man enough to face up to what you did —*as* a man?"

Bain told himself that the dog looked weary and worn, had dull coat and lackluster eyes. But the dog, the animal that looked more wolf than the German Shepherd it passed as, panted quietly around the newspaper and gazed at Bain with disdain.

One last try to reason with the monster. "We can't change what's deep down. You're what you are, and I'm what I am. Tell you right out I'll always be a cop, always be looking to nail you. But just what are you? Something that doesn't have the guts to get up on its hind legs and be the man you started out being? Or are you Val? Could you be yourself again? Or have you forgotten what your true self is?"

Fire stood unmoved.

Bain gave a sharp gesture of dismissal.

Fire raised a hind leg and took a territorial leak on the fence.

Bain's temples throbbed. This was what they called seeing red. He pulled his gun and leveled it at Fire. What could they get him for if he shot a dog? Nothing, really. At most a fine. Almost he squeezed off the shot.

But it wasn't a dog he was after; it was a man. It was as a man that Val had to get his. Bain put away his gun unfired. He didn't know what a wolfdog's peripheral vision was, didn't know if Fire had even been aware of Bain taking aim at him.

Bain watched Fire trot unhurriedly to the door opening and shove himself inside with the Lupescus'

newspaper still firmly in his jaws.

Heavily, Bain negotiated the sagging steps of his porch to pick up from his scraggly lawn his own copy of the daily paper.

He plunked himself down in the wicker chair and skimmed the news. The second section featured travel and leisure. Bain grimaced at a shot of a record tarpon and the proud sportsman. He turned the page with a snap and fixed on a bevy of beauty queens lined up for a contest. What smooth flesh, what dangerous curves. Bain shot a glance toward the Lupescus house. What was Fire making of this? Could a dog's eyes make sense of the dots? Why not? Bain knew dogs made sense of the lines on television screens. If Fire's eyes were looking at this picture, what was Val's mind thinking about it? What were his gonads doing?

Bain rolled the paper into a bat and smacked it against one palm. By God, that was the way to go.

He got to his feet too fast, swayed a second, but the wave of blackness passed away. He moved more slowly into the house and into the kitchen. The draw was the magnet-held calendar on the refrigerator door. His eyes picked out this month's phases of the moon. He smiled back at the sketched smile of a full moon. Luck was with him; fate was on his side.

Full moon tonight. Fire would be out on the Lupescus lawn pointing his nose at the moon.

Bain stepped lightly to the bathroom, where he took his time shaving.

The third bar he hit was the right one. Just as sleazy and noisy as the other two, but it was the one where he found the girl he was looking for. Not *the* girl as such, but the *type* girl. One young enough and pretty enough and curvy enough, and one like enough to the girl Val had raped and butchered eighteen long years ago, but one dumb enough to believe the shield Bain flashed still meant what it said.

He flashed his wad first and bought the watered drinks she'd be getting her cut on. Her dress clung to her where she didn't burst out of it; her hair was piled high on her head; she clanked with junk jewelry. He gave a guy who wanted to horn in a hard look that made the guy drift. Her lips parted; her eyes shone. Bain and the girl sat alone together squeezed in a corner booth, and he led her on till he could get her for soliciting. In spite of thinning, the drinks still packed enough proof to make this Brenda — the name she claimed — look even better as the evening wore on. But he wasn't out to work up and satisfy his own lust. He had her in mind for Val, for the man in the dog, for the beast in the beast. And when the waiters started upending the chairs on the tables, Brenda said, "Thirty bucks for an all-nighter. Your place or mine?" and he had her.

• • •

She looked around and raised her eyebrows at the precautions he had taken. "Why do you have that big, high fence all around?"

He kept his eyes roving as he unchained the gate in the fence and let himself and Brenda in. Didn't spot Fire yet, but it wasn't high full moon yet either. "Not only that, I have traps you don't see and poisoned bait." That much was true, but Bain never really wished that these would do Fire in. Bain made a fine distinction: it mattered that Val die *like* a dog, if not *as* a dog. But no punishment, no death, seemed enough unless and until Val face it *as* a man, if not *like* a man. Bain rechained the gate from the inside and gestured Brenda to follow him onto the porch and into the house. "There's a mean dog next door that would just love to tear me apart."

"Brrr." She gave a delicious shiver. "Aren't there laws against keeping vicious animals?"

"Laws against soliciting, too."

She flushed. "You can go after me; why can't you go after the dog?"

"I am — in my own way." He let them into the house. He burned a bit with shame at the mess the place looked, though he felt sure Brenda had seen plenty worse. "In fact, be honest with you, that's what this is all about."

"I don't understand."

"You don't have to understand. You just have to do what I tell you to do."

She didn't understand what he had in mind, and gave him an arch look, but she went along when he told her what she had to do. Anything must've seemed better than a bust. So he didn't want to score, didn't want any specialities. All he wanted was for her to lounge on his porch in her slip. She shrugged and said O.K. If that was all it took to keep him from taking her downtown and booking her, that seemed a small price to pay. Maybe her way of getting back at him was to tease him by asking him to help her unzip and by rubbing up against him while he fumbled for the tab and by letting the shoulder straps of her slip hang loose after she shimmied out of her dress.

That was all right with Bain. The more stirrings he felt, the likelier Val would feel something. Let Val get an eyeful.

It took an hour longer before Val got the eyeful, and then it was Brenda, not Bain, who spotted him first. Bain crouched hard by in the shadows but was dozing — at this point was having a sharp exchange with himself: "What do you mean, a leopard can't change his spots? If he leaps from here to there, of course he changes spots" — when Brenda's gasp snapped him to.

She cast a reproachful side-glance at Bain. "That's a fine-looking doggy. He don't look mean at all."

And indeed, Fire sat quietly and stared soulfully, not at the moon but at Brenda. He had let himself out

through the swinging panel of the Lupescus front door and come right up to the chain link fence without a sound reaching Bain's ears.

Guess the old hearing was going. But Bain smiled watching Fire sit there like that. It was going to work; suddenly ke knew it was going to work.

He held his breath as Fire reared up and stretched full-length against the fence. Fire fixed his topaz gaze on Brenda. Bain couldn't tell from here whether Fire's mouth slavered, but he could see the tongue flicker and he could see Brenda begin to get the message.

She threw her words over her shoulder as though she could not tear her eyes from Fire. "Hey, this dog looks like he's going to go for me."

Bain whispered gently but urgently. "Don't panic. I'm covering you. Just stand still so you don't step in the line of fire."

Fire dropped to all fours and backed away from the fence. For a second Bain feared that Fire had heard him and that prudence was overriding prurience, and Bain cursed himself under his breath. But Fire withdrew far enough for a good running start, gathered himself, and came charging. He threw himself upward, and when he saw he couldn't clear the fence, pulled back for another try.

Brenda turned trembling to face Bain. "Stand still, hell. What kind of kinkiness you into, anyway? If that crazy dog comes over the fence, I'm running inside the house."

"He can't come over the fence. Not as a dog, he can't."

Brenda gaped at Bain. "What does that mean, not as a dog?"

Fire — Val — answered her by metamorphosing, flowing from form to form. The wolf-dog, with a painful lengthening and rearticulating of bones, a transforming of fur, became a naked man, pale and ghostly in the moonlight. The man stood tall, walked jerkily to the fence, and began to climb.

The man's eyes fixed on Brenda. From deep in the man's throat came long-unused sounds trying to shape words. "I-ee . . . lo-ove, . . . I-ee . . . ha-ate. . . ."

"For God's sake!"

Brenda's cry broke the spell for Bain, though she herself seemed too stunned to move.

Going for his gun, Bain rose swiftly out of his crouch. *No sudden moves.* The blackness lapped at him.

What had he done? Spent all these years breathing down the killer's neck only to set up a poor doomed hooker for rape and disembowelment? Got to get Val before

The blackness washed over him.

Maybe inside, Val felt still youthful — after all, he'd be only thirty-three years old if he'd stayed human all along. But in the measurement of wear and tear, a dog's year is the equivalent of seven human years. Sev-

en times eighteen equals 126. No wonder Val looked kind of sheepish as his strength failed him and he stood all frail and wrinkled in the sight of the astonished girl just before falling away from his grip on the fence and collapsing into dust.



"Hoagies, scrapple, pretzels, cheesesteaks!
Hoagies, scrapple, pretzels, cheesesteaks!"

Here is a story about a post-holocaust society that is quite literally, colorful. The skin of rebels and lawbreakers is dyed special colors, and this tale concerns the journey of one such scarlet man and his conductor . . .

The Armless Conductor

BY
GENE O'NEILL

In the time between the Collapse and the Cleansing after the Company had constructed the coastal shields, lawbreakers were dyed special colors and banished to the wasteland to wander as marked pariahs. Eventually an escape route developed from San D Shield down the leg of Baja across the narrow guld of the Sea of Cortez to Mazatland and a medical clinic that dissolved the skin color. . . .

from Collected Tales of
the Baja Express

Karch balanced on his left leg and brushed an insect from his bare chest with the toes of his right foot, looking northwest over the trading area of the Ruins as the rays of the setting sun glinted off San D Shield, the half-dome a deep ebony. The sight made the boy uneasy, a feeling that the light sensors darkened the domed city to hide some evil undertaking from view. As he watched the sky turn pink, he remembered that tonight was Completion Eve — the anniversary of the construction of San D Shield by the Company . . . so long ago. He couldn't even imagine a horizon without the ever-present half-arc silhouette. "Looks like a giant beetle," he told himself, trying to shake his sense of unease. He let his gaze drop and scan over the trading area: several acres of old broken asphalt perched on the sun-scorched rim of a desert canyon east of the Ruins. His gaze paused for a moment on the cluster of eucalyptus trees bordering the west side of the area. It was hard for him to believe that once the area had been a park surrounded

with lush tropical growth — the trading area actually a parking lot for a world-famous zoo. But Lute had described his memories of pre-Collapse Balboa Park, and Karch believed the old man—

The crowd noise impinged on the boy's thoughts. The trading area was packed with people, shield celebrants standing out, dressed in brightly colored, one-piece modtrend suits with high collars, some wearing funmasks, laughing gaily and buying freely without haggling, their attire contrasting sharply with the clothing worn by most trading area residents: the wasteland defectives — chuckleheads, gargoyles, quasimodos, and others wearing little more than rags; and the freemen buyers and sellers dressed in their old raincoats, patched blankets, bathrobes, and odd headgear, the frayed garb decorated with feathers, pieces of plastic, and other intricate charms.

Karch grinned to himself, shedding the uncharacteristic melancholy, looking down at his near-empty belt — his wonderful wide leather belt with the special hooks, clasps, and ties. Only *two* jacks left. He had sold nine of the dressed rabbits, and it wasn't even dark. What a day. He began to keep pace with the crowd, which circled the cleared area in a clockwise direction looking at goods or amusements. . . .

"Jacks, freshly caught and cleaned rabbits," Karch cried over the crowd noise, moving with the flow of people. "No boils. Clean jacks from Baja." His regular customers knew his rabbits were all caught south of the wasteland in Latin Confederation territory. Clean and undiseased. He stopped for a moment, balanced deftly on his left leg, and unstrung one of the jacks from his belt, holding up the skinned carcass for inspection as the crowd moved around him. He thrust the rabbit at a pair of unmasked shield citizens.

Both man and woman shrank back, as if the jack were some kind of evil charm. The woman stared incredulously at Karch balancing on one leg, no sound issuing from her trembling lips.

"Wild rabbit," the boy explained, "makes a tasty roasted treat. Kind of gamy, unlike your shield foodpak—"

A disgusted look broke across the woman's face, and she quickly turned away.

"Ah, no," the man gasped, putting a protective arm around the woman's shoulder.

Karch shrugged and retied the jack to his belt.

"No, thank you, we've eaten," the shield man added in an apologetic tone as the pair moved away from the boy.

Karch chuckled to himself. He had not really expected a sale to them. He sold few rabbits to shield residents. His armless appearance was unsettling to them, and they usually held up

their noses at jack rabbits, apparently believing the animals were unfit to eat. . . . But earlier in the day, Karch *had* made a rare sale to a shield celebrant, a man dressed in silver and black modtrend with a matching funmask, wasted on either soar or rush — Karch really could not tell. The man hadn't even noticed Karch was armless. . . . The stares, the expressions on the faces of strangers no longer bothered him. In fact, he sometimes took a perverse delight when the shocked look crept into their eyes, and often he would contort himself into an unusual position, scratching his ear or the back of his head while balancing on one leg — his personal defense against unveiled revulsion.

"Hey, Karch," a man cried, and waved from a blanket display of fishing gear — hooks, lines, nets.

"Hey, yourself, Alf," Karch shouted back good-naturedly. The seated freeman wore typical garb: a long overcoat made from pieces of blankets, a patchwork of faded browns and blues and tans, and a wide-brimmed straw hat; both coat and hat frayed and dirty from long use. The bundled-up custom of dress was at odds with the muggy temperature, but it dated back to the time when the wasteland was full of ecologic hazards such as UV poisoning. Many of the older freemen, such as Alf, still wore the old clothes, decorated with charms, the clothing taking on a kind of magical significance — good luck against the hardship of life in the Ruins or surrounding wasteland.

Across the crowd from Alf, Karch spotted something interesting. Three men were talking on a platform raised about eighteen inches off the ground. It appeared that Mustafo had an opponent for his son, Baba — a duel with bullwhips. The other man didn't seem to be defective. . . . No, he was a freeman. Lately Mustafo had been having difficulty finding suitable opponents for Baba. Last week, Karch had seen a helpless chucklehead flayed. No contest. Soon Mustafo and his son would move on to another trading area to find suitable opponents. But perhaps later tonight there would be a good contest.

Karch shuffled along again with the flow of the crowd, enjoying the spectacle of the area. The energetic cries of the sellers:

"Hats, caps, special headwear."

"Charms . . . protect your young 'uns."

"Watch closely! Where's the stone?"

"Soar . . . rush."

"Dried fish!"

And the flashing colors of the modtrend: silver and gold and purple and emerald. . . .

The smells: spicy jerky, flowers, roasting meat, fresh onions and garlic. . . .

And the almost tangible sense of excitement in the air.

Just to the boy's left, a beautiful woman dressed in shorts, bodypaint, and earrings concluded negotiations and guided her male customer toward tent city, the encampment in the grove of eucalyptus—

Karch suddenly recalled he'd promised Ricardo the winemaker a fat rabbit. The boy glanced down at the two jacks remaining on his belt, neither very plump. . . . Well, he thought, maybe I can trade both rabbits for Lute's evening drink of wine. He cut across the crowd toward the winemaker's stall. Yes, it had been a profitable day indeed. He had accumulated two caps of soar, two foodpaks for his largest jack, and six credits of shield script.

At the counter of the winemaker's stall, Karch waited as Ricardo filled a jug for a freeman boy. "Thankee,' the winemaker said, pocketing the boy's script. "And Karch, how goes the jackrabbit trade?"

"Pretty good today," replied Karch, standing on one foot and unstringing the last two rabbits. "Sold most of my catch, but saved these two *special* for you, Ricardo."

The pinch-faced winemaker eyed both rabbits, poking at them with a finger. "Hmmm, skinny . . . and probably tough. . . ."

"Well," Karch said with an innocent smile, "you can take *both* for half a liter."

Almost instantly a grin broke across Ricardo's narrow face. "A deal it is, boy!" He took the jacks, then filled Karch's bota. "You coming back after dinner, Karch? Should be a lively night."

The boy nodded, hooking the bota to his wide leather belt; then, recalling Ricardo's interest in whip duels, he said, "Mustafo has an opponent for Baba."

The winemaker's eyes glistened in the fading light. "A sound one?" he asked.

"Appears to be. A stranger from the wasteland—"

Another customer had come up to the counter and extended a container for Ricardo to fill. Reluctantly the winemaker turned his attention from Karch. . . .

As he moved away from the booth, the boy noticed that old Peter was preparing to light the big drums around the trading area. It was dark and time for him to head home.

Karch hurried along the familiar path that led him along the border of the stand of eucalyptus through a thicket of dried scrub oak chaparral that screened the old rest room building from view. The desert ground cover turned his thoughts to Lute. The old man had raised him, taught him to read, told him stories that captured the magic of pre-Collapse times. It was Lute who had made the belt and taught Karch about jacks: how to find a run by tracing the droppings; how to set the trip-snares along

a run; how to detect boils that ruined the meat, and then to abandon the run; and, most important, how to spot the early signs of tularemia that decimated the jack population and could be caught by humans. The old man was the only family Karch had ever known. Lute had found him abandoned near a rabbit run, a squalling two-year-old. They had lived in the shantytown northwest of the park in the Ruins proper, but after Lute developed the lung sickness, they moved closer to the trading area and the jack runs to the south.

At the end of the path, Karch spotted the flickering light, and he whistled three times—

A blur of dark amber bounded down the path at the boy, nearly bowling him off his feet. "Hey, Lion. Hello, boy." The dog, a great golden mastiff, knelt at Karch's feet, its tail thumping the ground. The boy balanced on one foot and scratched behind the dog's ears with his free foot. "How's that feel?"

Lion growled his appreciation.

Looking up toward the light, Karch asked, "How's Lute?"

Recognizing the old man's name, the dog jumped up and led the way to the picnic table in front of the rest room. The old man sat at the table, his hands folded near a flickering candle.

"Hello, Lute," the boy said warmly.

"Hey, Karch," the old man answered, the light etching the creases into his gaunt, pale face. His dark eyes were bright and curious as he nodded toward Karch's empty belt. "Sold all that big catch?"

"Every one," answered Karch, bringing a big smile to Lute's face. Standing on one foot, the boy undid the items strung to his belt. "Two foodpaks, algae and krill stew, and. . . ." He extended the full bota.

The old man nodded and made an O with his thumb and forefinger. . . .

Karch proceeded to light the fire in the fireplace beside the picnic table. . . . Soon the stew was ready, and they ate, Lute washing down his food with wine, Karch sipping a mint tea.

Finished with the stew, the old man smacked his lips. "I think this calls for something special," he announced, an edge of excitement creeping into his voice. "Bring out the square, Karch."

The boy nodded and got up. He went inside the rest room and found the holocube on the bookshelf over Lute's cot. He hurried back outside and handed the old man the cube. . . .

Lute grinned, splashed a little more wine into his cup, then flipped on the holocube. The power cell of the square hummed to life. . . . Then, in the dust just at the edge of the circle of light from the candle, the figure of a man materialized. He gripped a bat, wore a dark blue hat, and was dressed in a white uniform with dark blue trim and the red numeral 37

under his heart. "The Great One," Lute murmured reverently, "of the legendary Dodgers. . . ."

Karch stared at the shimmering, fuzzy image of Luis Sandavol, an old baseball player, who stood with cocked bat, peering intently into the darkness at a missing pitcher. In pre-Collapse days, Lute had played the game as a youngster, had even seen videos of real games, and he loved to reminisce about the old stars, especially Sandavol, who had led his team to six world titles. Most of the old man's small collection of books concerned baseball, one a well-thumbed biography of Sandavol titled *The Great One.*

Lute droned on about a video of an all-star game he'd seen between the leagues, a game in which Sandavol had performed brilliantly. . . .

Normally the boy enjoyed listening to the old man, but tonight he couldn't concentrate. Looking at Lute's haggard face reminded Karch of the illness, and the drugs the old man needed. One of the women of tent city had told Karch that Lute needed treatment with antibiotics, the drugs available only from the shield at great cost. He was saving to start treatment—

"And he was MVP, Karch," the old man concluded, the force of the statement bringing on a fit of coughing that raked his body violently.

Karch pounded Lute's back with the ball of his right foot . . . but the coughing continued until blood-flecked spittle appeared at the corners of Lute's lips. "Here," Karch said, fumbling with the bota, splashing a small drink into the old man's cup. He held the cup until Lute could manage a sip between coughs, then another. . . . Finally, the hacking spell subsided, and Lute wiped his mouth on the back of his wrist. Karch helped him up from the table and inside to his cot, where the old man slumped down, not even bothering to throw back his blanket. The boy wiped the perspiration from Lute's face with a damp rag. . . .

Lion stood near the foot of the cot, watching the boy's efforts to make Lute comfortable. Karch nodded at the huge dog, as if to say: *He'll be all right now.* . . . And in a few moments the old man's chest was rising and falling steadily, the only sign of the coughing spell a slight rattle in his heavy breathing.

Karch tiptoed from the room, leading Lion behind him. The candle burned out, and the old hologram shimmered in the night, a ghostly image from the past. "Yes, he'll be fine for a while," he whispered, flipping off the holocube. He thought again of the money he needed, and sighed with frustration. Trapping jacks was all he knew, and almost everything he made was required to meet their minimal needs. . . After a minute or so of staring into the night, he sighed deeply. "Stay here, Lion," he said, de-

ciding to return to the trading area. The huge dog moved back to the rest room and sprawled in the doorway, his amber eyes alert and watchful, a formidable sentry. "I'll be back soon, boy."

A thin fog had rolled in from the ocean, covering the trading area with a light cloak of misty gauze that provided little relief from the heat, but shrouded the firelight from the drums. Here and there the more prosperous sellers had hung methane lanterns — giant fireflies hovering in the mist. The fog had *not* affected the sense of excitement. As Karch left the path, stepping onto the asphalt, the noise and tension of the crowd flowed over him. The area was really packed, almost shoulder to shoulder near the bigger displays. He moved through the cluster around the mouth of the path leading into tent city, mostly shield celebrants awaiting the return of friends, the men laughing nervously, breaking caps of soar or inhaling rush.

Karch worked his way around the group to a geodesic dome, the solitary tent pitched beyond the encampment in the trees. He moved around to the front of the orange dome, pausing when he saw the flap was closed. Next to the closed flap, a faded but elegantly lettered sign read:

MADAME SHELLY

Soothsayer, Clairvoyant, Dream-guide

In a hoarse voice the boy whispered, "Amara . . . ?"

The flap parted, and a tall girl emerged. Only the strange clouded-blue shade of her eyes marred an otherwise beautiful face. She cocked her head, her gaze slightly disjointed from the boy's position. . . . "Why, hello, Karch," she said, a surprised expression on her face.

He grunted his greeting, feeling a sudden tightness in his throat, an affliction he often experienced when alone with Amara.

"Many sales?" asked the girl, tilting her head back upright.

"I sold them *all* early," Karch replied, enthusiasm washing away the shy stiffness. "It looks like you've been busy too."

"Yes, it's been a fine day," the girl replied, obviously delighted with the good fortune, "but Aunt Shelly thinks our business will taper off as things pick up in tent city."

After a moment of awkward silence, Karch suggested, "Maybe I'll come back then. . . ."

A smile spread across Amara's face as she blinked rapidly. "I'd like that, Karch."

He said good-bye and moved away from the geodesic tent as a shield couple stopped to talk to Amara. "Does she tell fortunes?"

Karch let his gaze sweep over the milling crowd. There seemed to be a tight knot of people clustered around Mustafo's platform. Unable to stifle his curiosity, the boy worked his way

across the flow and into the group of fight spectators, close enough to the platform to get a good view. Mustafo's son and the lanky freeman were in opposite corners, both stripped to the waist, their bare chests covered with beads of sweat. Mustafo, with a wad of admission script in hand, was signaling for an assistant to give each man a whip. Baba uncoiled his bullwhip to its eight-foot length, tested the thick grip, then exploded the whip tip in the air like a rifle shot: *Crack*.

Mustafo held up his empty hand and moved to center stage. "Fifty credits to the winner," he shouted as the crowd noise died. ". . . To be determined in one of two ways." He dropped his arm now that he had everyone's attention. "Either a man yields by dropping his weapon, or he stays down on the floor longer than fifteen seconds. . . . *No* treatment during the bout—"

As if on signal, a raucous round of betting commenced:

"Ten on the dark 'un."

"Got you covered, here."

"Skinny lad got hurt in his eye . . . like him for five."

"You're on!"

"Five on Mustafo's boy. . . ."

The air was alive with electricity.

Karch looked around at the excited faces of the bettors, whose eyes were riveted on the whip fighters . . . *except* for one man standing at the fringe of the group, dressed in dark green modtrend and matching funmask, hands jammed into his pockets. Something about that man was not right. He was paying little attention to the unfolding spectacle on the platform; instead, his attention wandered, as if he were expecting something to happen. And his posture seemed wrong to Karch — kind of stiff. That's funny, the boy thought; a shield citizen *not* having a good time on Completion Eve. . . .

The crowd surged forward, forcing Karch's attention back to the platform. Mustafo dropped his arm to signal the start of the match, then he scurried off the platform.

Both men moved cautiously: the freeman, tall and thin, moved clockwise, his whip trailing behind him like a pet reptile; Baba, shorter and darker, moved in the opposite direction even more slowly, his whip recoiled into a lariat. After a seemingly endless period of circling, the freeman feinted a movement in, and Baba reacted with deceptive quickness, the tail of his whip snaking out in a blur: *crack*. The sound exploded harmlessly in the air over the freeman's head. Then the tall man closed the space between himself and Baba, flipping his whip and pulling it back, making little sound . . . but drawing a collective groan from the crowd. He had slashed a nasty gash across Baba's shoulder, and a red line trickled down the upper arm of the shorter man.

Karch was almost bumped off his

feet as people pressed forward to get a better view.

"Yeah, that a boy," a voice cried out encouragement to the freeman.

"Lucky move, just lucky," answered someone to Karch's left.

Baba's dark eyes narrowed as he stood quite still, watching the lanky freeman circling again. . . . Suddenly the freeman darted in and lashed out . . . just missing the shorter man by a fraction of an inch. Baba answered with a double snap as the freeman fell back out of range, and even though he had missed, the explosive crack of his whip quieted the excited crowd. . . .

In and out the freeman moved, providing an elusive target for Baba, much like a mongoose dancing around a cobra, provoking harmless, energy-sapping strikes. On and on the pair danced for several minutes—

Then, quite out of character, the freeman stumbled clumsily, almost dropping his whip handle. Taking advantage of his foe's momentary defenseless posture, Baba leapt forward, bringing his whip tip around and cracking it off right in the freeman's face.

"The eyes!" someone gasped.

Stunned by the blow, the tall man dropped to his knees, hands to his face, as if praying. Moaning, he let his hands slide down his chest, smearing himself with blood. His nose was split from tip to forehead.

Mustafo began to count: "One . . . two . . . three. . . ."

Feeling sick, Karch backed away and sucked in a deep breath. He turned, his gaze focusing on the man in green. The man was looking away, as if afraid of being surprised by someone behind him— That was it, of course. His whole bearing was one of leery alertness. Moving closer, Karch noticed the patch of exposed skin just above the high collar. And the man's hand, which had been removed briefly from his pocket to brush at his neck. In the flickering light, the color of the man's neck and hand resembled the color of the blood-drenched whip fighter. *Scarlet.* Karch knew the man's secret: he was a ***dyed criminal***, only disguised as a shield celebrant. But what was he doing here in this crowd? Normally they preferred the less populous wasteland, avoiding groups of freeman. . . .

As if hearing the question, the man eased away from the fight crowd and moved into the flow of people drifting around the area. Intrigued by the man's behavior, Karch followed. . . .

Something touched Karch's knee. "Hey, Karch." It was Michael on his scooter board.

"Hey, Mike," Karch answered, noticing his friend had only two amulets still dangling from his chest — good-luck charms made from plastic, bone, fur, and feathers that he sold to the freemen. "Good night, eh?"

The legless boy nodded and grinned.

Michael was one of Karch's best friends, helping out last winter when Lute had been so ill—

"Oh no," Karch moaned, desperately searching the crowd. "Mike, which way did the guy dressed in dark green go?"

Michael pointed with one of his blocks into the crowd. "That way—"

"Thanks," Karch called over his shoulder as he moved into the crowd and scanned the backs ahead of him. . . . Ah, there he is!

The scarlet man was cutting across the flow, apparently making his way to tent city. . . . Near the mouth of the main path into the tents, the scarlet man paused, looking around at the small knot of people. A bodypainted woman approached him. . . . He waved her away, then plunged into the darkness of the encampment.

The pause had given Karch an opportunity to catch up. He was only twenty yards away, when the man disappeared. . . . The boy slowed to a walk as he reached the pathway into the tents and eucalyptus trees, feeling the worn path with his feet, letting his eyes grow accustomed to the darkness, a pungent medicinal smell of eucalyptus hanging in the misty air. Soon the loud noise of the trading area was muffled, replaced by softer, almost indistinct sounds from the tents — whispers, giggles, cries, moans . . . even a groan of pain. . . .

A light flickered ahead on the path. A candle.

The scarlet man was talking to another man. . . .

Quietly, Karch edged closer and knelt close to a tent. The two appeared to be conducting some kind of negotiation . . . in whispers too low for Karch to discern. He shifted slightly to gain a better view of the other man. He was bare-chested, his blond hair long and bound tightly at the forehead with an indigo scarf. Karch recognized the man was a Surf 'n' Volley cultist from Baja. He had seen them around the area, usually bartering for fishing gear or old books. It was said they had high connections in the L.C. and smuggled things with impunity between the Confederation and the shield—

Something was wrong!

The sun worshiper was holding his finger to his mouth in the be-quiet gesture, after extinguishing the candle. Both men assumed wary, aggressive stances, peering up the path into the darkness. Beyond the pair a shadow seemed to split apart and move closer. . . . It was two men, both dressed in black, wearing ebony masks. *Companymen.*

"Freeze!" one of the Companymen ordered, as the other advanced unloosing a come-along-stun.

With amazing quickness, the cultist closed the distance between himself and the lead Companyman, knocking the stun aside and the man to the ground with one swooping kick. "Run!" he shouted.

The scarlet man turned and dashed past Karch.

As the blond man turned to follow, a pencil line of neon blue knifed through the darkness and struck him in the back. He froze in stride and seemed to radiate light—

Karch fled, tottering along the path unbalanced, expecting to feel something searing into his back at each step. . . . He dashed along the path, almost knocking over a man and woman walking back arm in arm . . . the light of the clearing. He bowled into the group of people milling around the mouth of the path, turned to the left, and darted into the thicker stand of eucalyptus. . . . Only then did Karch slow down and look back, gasping for breath. The path behind him remained empty. No one had followed him! He took another deep breath and turned back—

Something slammed into his stomach, making the air explode from his lungs. He stumbled to his knees, everything turning black, nausea welling up and choking him. . . . Fighting back the sickness, he blinked and tried to suck in a breath, barely clinging to consciousness. . . . Slowly his vision cleared, and, through the tears, he focused on the bare face of the scarlet man, who had discarded the fun-mask.

"What do you want, boy?" the man asked between clenched teeth, his scarlet face drawn up into an angry scowl, a small tree branch held menacingly in his hands.

Karch tried to answer, but only gagged. . . . He shook his head and shrugged his shoulders, trying to indicate he had no connection with the Companymen and meant the scarlet man no harm.

After a few guarded moments, the scarlet man dropped the club, but his expression remained tense as he stared back down the path. "O.K., get up."

Karch struggled to his feet. He shook his head and cleared his throat. "It isn't really safe here. . . ." He massaged his tender stomach muscles with his right foot. "They'll be back," he explained, still gasping for breath, "with hummers and their scanning equipment."

"Yes, I know," the scarlet man said, a frantic edge to his tone.

Karch could almost hear Lute's words: *Mind your own business. Don't meddle.* But he ignored the silent advice. "C'mon, I know a safe place." *Always helping the underdog. We're all underdogs.*

"Wait!" said the scarlet man, still frowning and eyeing the boy suspiciously. "Why should I trust you?"

"Because I trust *you*." He shrugged his shoulders. "Besides what do you have to lose?"

For the first time the scarlet man's expression softened, the lines easing slightly in his face. "What, indeed?" He gestured for Karch to lead the way.

• • •

The drainage ditch near the foot of the canyon was overgrown with bamboo that hid from view the rusted grille at the mouth of a culvert. Karch slid the grille aside, and, bending down, he led the scarlet man into the cool dampness of the long drainage pipe. "You'll be safe here. We're too far underground for their sensors. . . ."

After looking about cautiously, the scarlet man nodded and slumped down heavily, ignoring the wet slime, leaning his back against the concrete pipe. Karch squatted on his haunches. They sat quietly for a few moments, the scarlet man's eyelids drooping slightly. He sat up with a start. "I guess I'm exhausted," he admitted, then he added, "but I appreciate your help. Sorry for banging you back there. . . ."

"Karch," the boy said. "I'm O.K." Then, remembering the encounter with the Companymen, he asked, "Why were you meeting with the Surf 'n' Volley cultist back there?"

The tired expression hardened to a frown. "He was going to guide me south—"

"Baja?" interrupted Karch. "Why would you want to go there?"

The scarlet man replied in a hoarse whisper. "In Mazatland on the mainland across from the tip of Baja, there is a medical clinic that has developed the capability to dissolve the dye." He indicated the color of his face and hands. "But now, without the sun worshiper. . . ."

"Well," Karch asked tentatively, "what if you could still reach the clinic safely?"

"It means *freedom*," the scarlet man said, his voice rising with excitement. "But the obstacles, especially here near the border." He shook his head sadly. "No, without a guide, it's impossible," he concluded, his tone heavy with despair.

Karch shifted on his haunches, considering a more serious commitment. "After a brief silence, he said, "I know the border well . . . and, though I haven't been as far as the first Surf 'n' Volley camp, there is an old highway that follows the coast. . . ." His voice tapered off into the darkness as he contemplated his rash offer.

The scarlet man reached inside his shirt and withdrew a small pouch. "I promised the cultist two hundred credits for getting me to Mazatland. . . . If you get me to the cultist's northern encampment, I'll give you half the amount."

Karch's pulse raced. He barely earned that much in six months. Dumbly, he nodded his acceptance. . . . Then he stood up and said, "We'll need water and food. Stay here and sleep. I'll return before dawn with my dog and supplies."

In the graying predawn, Karch and Lion found the scarlet man peering out anxiously from behind the rusted

grille. "I was worried; a hummer has been circling for an hour—"

"It's gone," Karch said, pushing aside the grille. He balanced on one foot, giving the scarlet man a heavy backpack. "Our water," he explained. "And I've got foodpaks, here. . . . Oh, you'll need this if we see any more hummer patrols." He handed the scarlet man an old tan blanket, rolled neatly to fit across the backpack.

The scarlet man shrugged into the backpack and blanket and declared, "I'm ready."

"O.K.," the boy said, looking back over his shoulder. "C'mon, Lion."

They emerged single file from the other end of the pipe into the predawn, Karch leading them a hundred yards to a rusted sign mounted on a metal post:

DANGER

Area mined with buried explosives

No Tres-------

The right corner of the sign was rusted away.

"Follow my footprints carefully," Karch instructed the scarlet man. Then he led them slowly along an invisible trail winding through a sandy area covered with dried scrub oak chaparral. At one point they rested briefly, Karch pointing with his right foot at a stand of Torrey pines in a draw about twenty-five yards to the west. "That's one of my runs. . . ." After a few minutes' rest, they continued south in single file through the mined field, until the boy finally stopped again and announced, "We're safe now." He tapped his foot against a signless metal post.

They continued southwesterly, across gently rolling sand hills, until they came to a barrier, a twelve-foot-high cyclone fence topped with rusted blade wire, that ran east and west as far as they could see. "This way," Karch said, following the fence west to a spot where dry chaparral bunched against the fence. The boy pulled away a large clump of the gray brush, revealing a well-worn dip under the bottom of the chain links. "Do it like this," he said, lying on his back and easily scooting under the barrier. Lion followed . . . then the scarlet man.

They dusted themselves off on the other side of the barrier, aware of surf breaking somewhere to their right in the dim light. Karch nodded toward a series of ravine mouths just visible to the east, an area supporting Torrey pines and sagebrush. "My other runs—"

At that moment the sun rose over the hills, spilling light over the scorched-brown land . . . and out over the ocean, dark bluish gray in the early light, waves rolling in and breaking along a narrow arc of dark sand, the water changing to a frothy green as it receded from the beach.

"There's our road," Karch said, indicating an old asphalt highway that stretched south through the sand dunes, its tired gray color broken up

with brown patches of dead growth — burnt field grass and chaparral. "Welcome to Baja," the boy said, beginning to move forward toward the highway.

They walked the old road for about an hour, the hills to the left growing steeper and rising higher, more heavily ravined; the scars barren of any plant life; and the coastline to the right becoming more irregular, steep cliffs down into the surf, then onto coved beaches. . . .

Suddenly to the north they heard a faint sound over the roar of the surf — a distant mechanical whine—

"Down, Lion," Karch ordered, even before seeing the aircraft. The dog sprawled into a prone position in the sand beside a clump of sagebrush. "Watch." The boy pulled his blanket from his belt and dropped down flat, flinging the cover over himself. "Do the same and be still," he said to the scarlet man from beneath the blanket. . . .

The hum grew gradually louder . . . passed overhead . . . circled east over the coastal range . . . and finally north again until its sound was drowned by the surf. . . .

Karch sat up and let the blanket slide off his shoulders. He reached over with a foot and scratched Lion's head. "Good dog," he said, grinning. The great mastiff licked the boy's toes. Laughing, Karch hopped to his feet and said, "It's safe to go on now."

They continued south for the rest of the day, leaving the highway to avoid villages with barking dogs whenever they saw fishing skiffs rising and falling ahead on the ground swells of coves. And though they encountered no people along the old road, they saw many birds — gulls in the air, sandpipers skittering along the sand, and a flight of ugly pelicans skimming the waves, gracefully searching for fish. . . .

At sunset they stopped where the highway ran level with the water, making camp on a flat section of coarse gray sand. They collected a huge pile of bleached driftwood. Soon the sun-dried wood was snapping and popping loudly, casting sparks into the air. After dinner it grew cool, both the scarlet man and Karch draping their blankets over their shoulders, scooting in closer to the campfire. Karch rested his back against an old log, staring up into the sky, enjoying the rhythmic slapping of the waves. Lion crawled up close to the boy and rested his head on his paws.

"Should find that Surf 'n' Volley camp tomorrow," Karch said, petting Lion.

"You've never been this far south?" the scarlet man asked.

"No," the boy chuckled. "Not much cover for jacks down here." He looked over at the scarlet man after roughing up Lion's fur. "You've been wandering with the color for a long time?"

"Yes," the scarlet man answered with a sigh, staring into the fire. "I received the judgment five years ago . . . after a man died in a brawl in a histro-bistro in San Fran Shield."

He said no more, and Karch was reluctant to pry further. Instead, he looked south just in time to see a shooting star fall to the horizon — a freeman sign of good fortune. Turning back to the scarlet man, he said, "I don't understand why the clinic is so far. The L.C. doesn't render judgments of color."

"No, they don't," the scarlet man answered over the crackle of the fire. "Actually, the clinic specializes in the treatment of skin problems. . . . The discovery of the color-dissolving technique was an accident during an experiment with skin pigmentation. . . . But the rumor of its existence is common knowledge now in the wasteland. . . . My family supplied the funds. . . ."

They watched the fire burn down slowly, until finally the boy suggested, "Maybe we should get some rest." He threw more wood on the fire and stretched out beside his dog. . . .

Karch awakened suddenly, a sense of something wrong. Lion stood up slowly, the hair bristling along his neck, a growl welling up from deep in his chest. Karch had the creepy sensation of being watched. Something was out there, just beyond view. He piled more wood on the fire, which had burned down to coals. Then he carefully placed the tips of several branches into the coals. . . . Suddenly the fire flared to life, the dry wood snapping loudly as it ignited, casting a dim umbrella of light into the night. . . In the darkness, about thirty yards away, Karch sensed movement. Yes, he caught the reflection of a set of eyes . . . *three* sets of fiery eyes glowing in the night.

"What's the matter?" the scarlet man whispered, crawling over to the boy and dog.

"I'm not sure," Karch whispered back. "Grab a torch." He touched the end of a branch with his toe, keeping his gaze on the red eyes. He could just make out the shapes of three figures at the edge of his visual field. . . . They were moving closer, separating . . . and charging.

"Get 'em, Lion," the boy cried, pulling a branch from the fire with his foot.

The mastiff bounded out of the circle of light at the pack of three shapes. Suddenly a pair of eyes veered left . . . another to the right. Lion met something head-on in a flurry of movement and fierce growling. . . .

One of the creatures closed in from the right—

Karch flung the burning torch, showering sparks as the animal veered away and retreated. But to the boy's left the other creature charged in closely, the scarlet man moving out

to meet it, extending his torch like a bayonnet. . . . The animal closed in, and the scarlet man thrust the torch into its face, causing it to stumble to its knees. It was a boarlike animal with white hair and a huge, tusked head. Quickly the creature was up and away, yelping like a dog. . . .

Suddenly three sets of red eyes glared in the darkness again.

"Come back, Lion!" Karch shouted into the night. "Come back, boy. . . ." In a few seconds the mastiff returned to camp, his neck hair still bristling. The boy inspected the dog closely. "You're O.K., boy," he said soothingly. Then he piled more wood on the fire until he had a twenty-five-foot-high blaze.

"What are they?" the scarlet man asked.

"They're San Onofre coyotes," Karch explained. "An albino mutant with a head thicker than a pit bull. . . . They won't come any closer without the rest of the pack. They're afraid of Lion and the fire. . . . It'll be dawn soon." They maintained an alert vigil for an hour or so until the eastern sky grew pink . . . and the eyes disappeared. Then they broke camp and headed south.

In the early afternoon, Karch spotted a cloud of dust approaching rapidly along the old highway. . . . "Horsemen," he said in a low, cautious voice. . . . As the horsemen neared, he realized they wore the blue uniform of the Guardia. He glanced about, but there was no cover nearby.

The six riders slowed and circled them.

"*Buenos*," the leader said, reining in his sweating mount. Several men unholstered their sidearms and spoke rapidly in Spanish. From the corner of his eye, Karch saw one of the riders take a set of leg-irons from his saddlebag. He had heard that the Company was forced to pay bounty for all escaped colored people taken in the L.C. He was heartsick. So close to Lute's medicine—

"*El Jefe*!" a voice shouted from the sand dunes far to the right. A group of people appeared, three men and two women: the bronzed men bare-chested, their hair secured neatly at their foreheads with colorful scarves; the browned women dressed in white shorts and halter tops, wearing flowers in their braided queues. The people advanced, one of the men speaking to the Guardia leader in Spanish for a few moments. . . .

Then, abruptly, the leader signaled his men: "*Vamos*. . . ." And the horsemen rode off to the north as if they'd seen nothing extraordinary.

Karch, Lion, and the scarlet man were escorted to the nearby Surf 'n' Volley encampment. . . .

At sunset ceremonies the cultists mourned the fate of their friend shot by the Companyman up north. Later they made an agreement with Karch,

that the boy would be the exclusive guide for colored people to this first encampment.

In the morning the boy and dog returned north.

Several weeks later, Karch towed a large object on the scooter board back to the rest room picnic table. "Hey, Lute."

The old man poked his head from the shelter doorway. Since the first of the antibiotic treatments, he had lost his gaunt look, and his cheeks appeared almost rosy. He moved quickly to the boy's side and helped him hoist the machine onto the table. "My goodness, where did you find it, Karch? Are the batteries good?"

Karch smiled smugly and inserted a cartridge into the machine. He touched a button, throwing a rectangle of light against the wall. . . . He made an adjustment of the lens—

A grainy, jumpy picture materialized on the wall . . . and a man's voice, the sound scratchy, almost inaudible with static: ". . . for the National League." The two-dimensional picture moved in, a close-up of a batter wearing a blue-trimmed uniform and the red numeral 37 on his chest.

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Richard Mueller is a frequent contributor to F & SF *who brings great diversity of subject and tone to his stories. In "Bless This Ship" he gives us a pair of interwoven yarns in a WW II sea story. "I got the idea for this," he writes, "after becoming fascinated with the phrase 'Constructive Total Loss.'"*

Bless This Ship

BY
RICHARD MUELLER

"Bless this ship and all who sail in her."

I have heard this said many times since the war started; in shipyards, at the wharves and landings, from ministers and priests, mayors and councilmen, visiting firemen and ladies' auxiliaries. I know this prayer. It is more than a benison; it is a plea for extraordinary mercy, for divine intercession. For beating the longest odds. For circumventing the law of averages. For quiet voyages, lucky voyages, uneventful voyages. And, when all those fail, it is a prayer for bare survival.

The *Maniwaki* is silent now, and all the stranger for that. There is a watchman at the end of the dock and a marine on the gate, but their concern is on other matters. No one would tamper with this ship. No one would break the aura of miracle she represents. Perhaps no one could. Or almost no one.

HMCS *Maniwaki* is as different now from the clean, compact hull I first sailed in as a ship could be and still float. But she does float, and to her I owe my life.

Plodding, uneven footsteps sounded on the crooked boards of the dock, tapping over the creak of the wharf, the groaning of the rope fenders and old tires that keep *Maniwaki* off the wood. I can see no one in the thick Grand Banks fog, but I cannot mistake the sound of that tread. I have heard it all my life.

My father is a strange man and has been strange for as long as I have known him. Maman says that he was always a bit odd — that is what had attracted her in the first place — a staid Scottish schoolteacher from

Trois Rivières. Not the sort to fall in love with an immigrant shipwright, a shepherd's son from Languedoc. But she did. She met him on holiday in Halifax, married him, and had never gone back. He was twenty-five. She was twenty-three. A year later I had come along — Robert Bruce Lannes. Robert Bruce; my mother's last victory in a lifelong battle of wills with my mad French father. Crazy Henri Lannes, the terror of the shipyard. I expect that, in a few years, marriage would have mellowed my father and he would have settled down into a healthy working existence: the ideal husband and father. With any luck I would have had a normal childhood. But the broad brush of war has the ability to alter all your plans.

Father was called up in August of 1915. Logically, being a shipwright for a country engaged in a naval war, he should have been exempt, but there was some mistake with His Majesty's Forces. At first my mother was determined to secure an exemption, but Father was still under the impetuous sway of youth. Before she could mount her campaign, Crazy Henri had enlisted, and shortly found himself on board a transport bound for Britain. He confided to me later that he had joined the army happily, knowing that the union would take care of Maman and me, and that service in the Canadian Expeditionary Forces would give him an opportunity to see France again. How wrong he was. He had not anticipated Gallipoli.

His transport was diverted to the Mediterranean, touching first at Gibraltar, where the ship took on supplies, mail, and fever. Within two days of sailing the Dardanelles, two-thirds of the soldiers and half the crew were down with it, though not my father. He stayed healthy while others were dying around him. The ship put in briefly at Malta to transfer the dead ashore and the sickest men to a hospital ship. Then, with a reduced complement and their orders changed once again, this time for Salonika, the troopship was off, making its way slowly through the Greek isles. There were no escort vessels available to shepherd her, but the danger from Turkish ships blockaded in the Dardanelles or Austrian ships bottled up in the Adriatic was deemed to be small, so it seemed a justifiable risk. No one on the Allied naval staff was aware that German submarines had reached the Mediterranean.

The first torpedo broke the steamer's back, sending a pillar of fire high into the night. The second sank the bow section and pitched my father into the water, where he tied himself to a mess table and held on until morning. When dawn broke he found himself alone on the sea, excepting a long swell-borne crescent of flotsam and a small island, baking in the sun. At last feverish, he waded ashore and collapsed on the sand.

It would be romantic to report

that he awoke in the cottage of a beautiful Greek woman, with mile-deep eyes and long silky black hair, who warmed him with her heat and breathed life back into his failing body, but nothing of the sort happened. Father came to facedown on the edge of a tidal pool, his neck burned raw by the sun, a sand crab exploring his nose. And fully in the grip of an advanced case of fever. He realized immediately that he needed medical attention, or at least large amounts of fresh water, and that he wasn't likely to find it here. He decided that, like the soldiers at Suvla Bay whom he'd been originally intended to join, he now had the same imperative: get off the beach or die.

The sand gave way to scrub vegetation over rock and a cliff he would have found difficult to climb in a healthy condition, so he stumbled along the base of it until he came to a narrow defile leading inland and upward. Father had to rest many times, but at last he reached a grassy plateau dotted with sheep. Where there were sheep, there must be shepherds, and indeed there was a small cottage at the far corner of the meadow. Greece was allied to Canada, so they would be friendly. This knowledge so pleased him that he overexerted himself again and passed out.

This time when he awoke, he was in bed, in the cottage of the girl who tended the sheep, but again it was not a fairy tale, for she was as stocky as a wharf-pile and plain as a mud fence. She stank of sheep, garlic, and sweat. She spoke neither French nor English. And, her Samaritan capacities already strained, she was all for pitching him out. She made a long series of meaningless gestures, of which Father could read only two: "You may have water" and "Leave!" Father, too weak to argue, attempted to do as he was told. He was not successful.

Awakening after several hours on the muddy verge in front of her cabin and finding no sign of the ugly shepherdess, he drank from a barrel of brackish water, then stumbled out to take a look at the sheep. When I asked him what had been going through his mind, why he had not attempted to steal some food or to get more sleep, he said that he had believed that if he slept too much, he might die. And he was afraid of the formidable Greek girl who, in his weakened state, could easily have pitched him over the cliff. So he did his best to keep awake and moving. Needing something to occupy his mind, he staggered out to look at the flock of scraggly sheep attempting to graze upon the meadow. He immediately saw two things. The sheep were terribly thin, and the grass in the meadow was almost gone. Alternately stumbling and sitting, shaking with fever and panting from exertion, he made a survey of the land.

All possible exits from the patch were blocked with large stones, too

big or too sharp for the sheep to get around. He had no idea why the shepherdess had made no effort to move them, but her sheep would not long survive on the area they had left. He decided to move a stone and scatter the stupid animals to greener pastures, but he was too weak.

Suddenly aware of an ugly noise, he looked up to see the Greek girl shouting at him. With a mix of gestures, shoves, and loud sounds, she made it clear that she did not want the stones moved. He indicated the scrawny bellies of the sheep and the good grass beyond the ragged wall, but she made scattering gestures and then curled her hands, one above the other, in front of her face, wiggling the fingers. Mouth fingers? Whiskers? Father shrugged. The girl wiggled her fingers again, and gave out with a disturbing growl. Teeth. An animal of some kind, a monster beyond the stones that would eat the sheep. Father grappled at his belt, coming up with the one piece of his kit that had survived the sinking, his long sword-bayonet. Inflamed with sickness, he brandished it bravely in the air and growled back at the shepherdess.

The effect was immediate. The girl jumped up, backed away, and ran for the cottage. Now I've done it, Father thought. She'll lock herself in. Or come back with a gun and do me where I sit. But again the girl surprised him. She returned with a fired-clay platter of food and a bottle of wine, which she presented with a great display of respectful expressions and soft, admiring sounds. Under the circumstances, Father decided not to look a gift horse in the mouth, and reflected as he ate that Greek was not at all an ugly language if the speaker was not shouting at you. For her part, the girl seemed to be in awe of his newly displayed courage. She shyly felt his biceps, and would have examined his weapon as well, but Father determined to keep it safely out of reach until he understood more of both her language and her intentions.

After he had been warmed and strengthened by the food and wine, he felt better, and when the girl indicated that they might indeed move one of the stones, he made a respectable showing. They managed to push the boulder aside, then he sat back to rest while she drove the sheep out onto the virgin grass. Lulled by the soft sounds of her scolding the beasts along, he fell into a dreamless slumber.

At dusk she woke him and they gathered in the flock, replaced the stone, and repaired to the cabin. Not wanting to broach the delicate subject of adultery — particularly with such an ugly girl — Father was relieved when she prepared a straw pallet for herself upon the ground and indicated — with another long series of obscure gestures — that he should sleep in her bed. Vaguely he understood. Until he was able to slay

the monster, he would sleep as chaste as any heroic knight of legend. That left him with just two problems: What monster? And what happened if he did manage to kill it?

But the questions faded as the days fell into a pleasurably boring routine. Following breakfast they would move the stone, chase the sheep out to pasture, and stand guard. At dusk they would bring them in, close the wall, and retire to the little cabin, where Father would labor for an hour or two each night on his Greek vocabulary. He possessed no natural facility for languages, but, with nothing else to do, he gradually picked it up. In time he learned a number of things.

The woman's name was Olga.

The island was called Myteriakos.

Olga was the only inhabitant of Myteriakos, excluding the sheep and the monster.

The boat that brought her supplies — wine, flour, beans, sugar — and took away her wool came twice a year, but the last two runs had not appeared. Father attributed this to the war. Olga, who kept a large supply of dry stores in reserve, was not yet overly concerned. Besides, they could always eat the sheep. But when Father suggested that they might augment their limited diet with fish from the cove, Olga was vehemently opposed. In fact, she never went near the sea and was at first horrified and then deeply in awe when Father insisted on swimming in the cove. She would not accompany him to the beach, but would stand upon the clifftop, wringing her hands in silent concern. Olga, on the other hand, did her bathing in an icy spring-fed creek if she bathed at all, which Father encouraged. The cabin was small, the sheep pungent, and when Father found that he was able to smell Olga from his bed, he knew it was time to wash. About every four days on the average.

As his vocabulary grew, Father made increasing attempts to probe the secret of Olga's monster — which she called *It-ra* — but, outside of the fact that it would eat the sheep and that he was supposed to kill it when it came, he learned little. Olga considered it bad luck to even speak of the thing.

After some seven months of this enforced paradise — Father determined later that it was March of 1916 — a storm roared over the island, shaking the cabin and scaring the sheep so badly that several actually jumped the rocky barriers and scattered. When the raging weather broke, disappearing as fast as it had come, Olga and Father staggered out across the muddy field, gaping at the sky, which had given birth to a multitude of rainbows among the thunderheads. "Terrible," Olga had muttered, and had then wandered off to count sheep heads, while Father had gone to have a look at the beach.

The storm had driven ashore an immense quantity of driftwood —

ship planks, wreckage, logs — and Father decided that it would be a good idea to pull as much as possible back to the cabin. It would augment their dwindling fuel supply, and he had vague thoughts of constructing some sort of signal beacon should April pass without the arrival of the spring steamer. He stumbled down the ravine to the beach, climbing over the ruined spine of a longboat that had washed up almost to their meadow, and sloshed out to the tide line. The storm had turned the tide pools to frothing soup and forced schools of fish in among the waves. A spear, Father decided. Perhaps with a spear I can skewer a fish or two before they get their bearings and run seaward. He seized a long curving branch from the rubble and began to sharpen it with his bayonet.

It was Olga's terrified cry from the hill that had caused him to look up. "*It-ra, It-ra*!" she screamed, waving her arms, and then pointed out to sea. Father turned and looked out over the cove, shielding his eyes with a hand, just as the monster surfaced offshore.

The creature was a good two hundred feet, from its flattened pinkish flukes to the cluster of tentacles at its head, which easily doubled the length. It broke water like a submarine, and showed a great dark eye that seemed to fix on him. Father's jaw fell and his bowels opened up. He dropped the makeshift spear and began to back toward the ravine, the bayonet clutched in his white knuckles. The creature seemed to sense this and raised its huge curved beak above the water, snapping it down, blowing out spray and foam with a loud report. Then, one by one, long suckered tentacles lifted above the surface of the cove and began to move toward my father, who was doing his best to not be there when they arrived.

He was conscious of Olga's incoherent screaming as he scrambled up the defile, bouncing from rock to rock, hanging on to the bayonet as if it mattered. As if the Sheffield toothpick could really make a difference. I'm supposed to kill *that*, he thought, suffering the sort of detached, out-of-body feeling that he associated with death or the threat of death. Who does she think I am, Hercules?

And that thought triggered another process. Father was not an educated man, but he could read and enjoyed tales of adventure. At Mother's urging he had devoured travelogues, Western romances, heroic ballads, and classics. Mythology. In the Greek tales the solutions were set up as puzzles. No matter how courageous or powerful, the hero could overcome the obstacle only by overcoming its weakness; and every god, monster, or evil plan had its flaw. This *it-ra—ydra*? hydra? — would have a weakness. He had only to discover it before it killed him.

As he reached the meadow, any

doubts he might have had about the thing's ability to traverse the land had vanished. While the creature seemed to be identical in every detail but size to the little squids that the Grand Banks fishermen brought up in their nets, it had no apparent qualms about thrusting itself ashore to devour both sheep and shepherds. There was a chance he might outrun it, but the reach of those tentacles would certainly gather in the sheep, and probably Olga as well. And there was no time to move the stones and drive the sheep through.

He ran toward Olga, who was standing her ground, and then ducked as he felt the shadow of a tentacle cross above him. Three of the sinewy fingers reached for the girl, but veered off as if stung. Then one curled about a startled sheep and lifted it high in the air.

"Run, run!" he screamed, the Greek word having deserted him, but she refused to budge. She was standing firm, her hand clutched about a small carved stone that hung from her neck on a lanyard. She held it out as if it were a cross and she were expecting vampires. Another tentacle darted for them and again pulled away.

Three sheep were waving in the air before he understood. The stone — amulet — was some sort of protection against the thing. The tentacles kept a good twenty feet distant, so long as she boldly presented the stone, and he kept close to her. But they were losing sheep. Another laden tentacle dipped below the cliff line. There was a frantic squealing, followed by a crunching sound that froze my father's blood. He remembered that great clacking beak.

"Kill it!" she cried, urging him forward. Sure, how? The bayonet was perhaps thirty inches long. The thing's hide, if it gave at all, might conceivably be thicker than that. Even if it wasn't, any vital spot must surely be deeper. She urged him on again.

"If I'm to be the sword, you must be my shield," he replied in English, and, clamping his free hand on her wrist, he began to drag her toward the monster. She seemed to understand and did not resist, but waved the amulet, keeping the tentacles at bay.

The ravine presented an insane spectacle. Moving with a undulating motion, like that of a snake attempting to shed its skin, the hydra was slowly working its way up the narrow defile. Some of the tentacles were being employed to lever it up and force it along, while others seemed to focus on Father and the girl. Beast or god, the hydra was no fool. It sensed that Olga and Father were a threat to it, and whipped and thrust its tentacles at them, but under no circumstances would it come closer than a dozen feet.

"We've got it!" Father cried excitedly, not completely sure what he

meant but caught up in the energy of the battle. Suppose the charm affected the tentacles but not the beak? What if the thing reared up and crushed them? The mouth opened again, the beak clacking together with a deafening snap. The mouth. The hide was tough, but the mouth. . . .

And Father knew.

He glanced at Olga. "Are you ready?"

She nodded, perhaps not knowing what he was referring to, but willing to follow her Hercules into the jaws of death. The jaws. Father's reason detached and went cold.

It made a perverse and powerful sort of sense.

And somehow nothing else mattered but carrying through the conclusion of the notion, the one solution as Father saw it. The beast attempted, too late, to back away, rippling over the harsh stones of the ravine, rolling them under its rubbery hide, but large things move slowly. The gleaming beak drew apart, and they were moving . . .

. . . up . . .

. . . and through. . . .

Imagine a red-hot coal in your throat. Try to get away from it. Thrash, roll, but it's there and it won't go away. Gastropods do not have peristalsis in the way that humans do. They do not swallow so much as inhale, and they cannot reverse the process and vomit out what they've swallowed. Olga's stone charm made the creature buck and writhe, while Father stabbed and tore at its vitals, the both of them gasping for breath. After a time the struggles grew feeble, then stopped. Luckily both the beak and the alimentary canal were open enough to admit air, and sometime later Father and Olga were able to cut their way clear.

But what happened to the hydra? I had asked. The seabirds came, said my father. They came in their thousands, and soon there was nothing left but the great beak, a few bits of gristle too tough even for the seagulls, and the bones of the dead sheep. In April the steamer finally came and took my father away.

"I am happy to say that we never did sleep together," Father had said. "I remained true to your mother. But Olga did give me this."

And he showed me the amulet. It was pear-shaped, with the carven suggestion of tentacles — indented lines — at the wide end and pierced to admit a leather thong through the center. There were two faintly graven eyes. With a certain amount of imagination, it could have been a squid, a kraken, a hydra.

"But this is yours, Olga."

"Don't need it now. Is yours. Protect. Hero. Protect."

"What? Protect? How?"

"Protect."

The army was surprised to find my father alive, and, in the manner of bored men seeking a good story,

seized upon his tale of shipwreck and succor by a Greek shepherdess (he omitted any mention of the monster) and proclaimed his survival a miracle. He was shipped home to Canada and separated from the service with a compassionate discharge. Mother was waiting. "Somehow," she said "I knew it would take more than a torpedo to kill you. Far too impersonal."

Protect.

Father went back to Canadian Vickers, and, after a time, peace came. I began to grow up. I suffered fevers, bruises, sprains, fights. My mother almost died of influenza and once broke her ankle. But the old man, nothing. No job accidents, no sickness, no misfortune. He would get himself mixed up in barroom brawls where people would be thrown through windows, doors, and mirrors, and he would come home without a scratch. And when we kidded or scolded him about it, he would fish out his amulet and wink. "Protect," he would say with a grin. "Protect."

Protect.

I'd won a scholarship to McGill and had a bare year to go when war came again. My inclination was to do exactly what my father had done and join the Forces, but the recruiter convinced me to wait. Finish up, he said, then go in as an officer. Stay out of the army, my father said; you're liable to get drowned. So in the fall of 1940, I found myself as a brand new sublieutenant fresh from gunnery school, assigned to His Majesty's Canadian Ship *Maniwaki*. My father was amused.

"That's my ship."

"What?"

"That's one of the ones we're building at Vickers. When we get it done, I'll let you know."

So I moved back in at home and took the trolley to and from the yard, watching the *Maniwaki* take shape. She was a Flower-class corvette, an English design being built on contract all over the empire. A thousand tons, one four-inch gun (mine), and depth charges. A submarine killer. The Royal navy needed sub killers just then, convoy escorts, maids of all work, and Can-Vickers was turning them out as fast as possible. My father made life miserable for the yard crew.

"We build this one especially well. My son will sail in her."

Protect.

Gradually the crew assembled: trawlermen from the Grand Banks, farm boys from the prairie provinces, factory hands from Montreal and Quebec City. The skipper was a veteran of twenty years in freighters. The first lieutenant had been a lawyer, the navigator a yachtsman, the engineer a plant manager. We arrived, got to know each other, trained, watched the ship take shape. Then one day she was ready, and they put her commissioning date on the calendar. Father was ready, too. He grabbed me by the arm as I was leaving for the yard.

"You've got the watch tonight?"

I nodded. "We commission tomorrow. Are you coming?"

"I'm coming now," he grunted. "Go."

Father had that concentrated silence about him that I had come to think of as "don't ask me now," so I didn't. We caught the trolley, checked in at the yard gate, and walked down to the graving dock, all in silence. The *Maniwaki* lay alongside her pier, brightly illuminated, nearly complete. A sentry stood casually under the gangway light, leaning on the sign-in book. As he saw us coming, he straightened up.

"Evening, sir."

"Evening, Rogers. Anyone aboard?"

I signed us in as he checked his log. "Two welders been on and off all night, and an instrumentman's been calibratin' the compasses. And Mr. Rosse, of course."

Sam Rosse, the ASW officer, was our other college boy, a Manitoban from the University of Minnesota. His job was perhaps the most important aboard: submarine detection and destruction, and he took it very seriously. He seemed O.K. — all of us did —but we wouldn't know until we hit Fleet Training, and perhaps not even then. Combat bloods or breaks the blade. Rosse was waiting as we came aboard.

"You know my dad?"

"Of course. Evening, Mr. Lannes."

Dad just nodded. "I want to show him around — from our point of view. All right? I'm assuming the watch."

"Very good. See you in the morning, then."

After Rosse had disappeared, I turned to the old man. He was standing quietly, shifting from foot to foot, feeling the ship. He took a long scan, from her jack to her sternpost.

"Do you mind telling me why you're here?" I asked.

He sighed heavily and looked at me for a long time. Finally he said,- "Your mother is worried about you."

"Mothers worry," I replied, sounding very grown-up. Very preposterous. Father seemed not to notice.

"She thinks you are going to get yourself killed," he muttered. "Personally, I think you're tougher than that, but, as you say, mothers worry."

I felt like a jerk and told him so. He laughed, then: "You have been to college. You'll make something important of yourself. You may say anything you want to me, so long as it is the truth."

I looked out across the harbor. It was clear — no fog — and a big auxiliary cruiser was warping in to the Admiralty Dock, her deck lit up with work and running lights. She'd come in from God only knew where, thousands of miles of hostile ocean. No doubt the crew was looking forward to leave, a few days of letting down and letting go before they had to face it again. I could just make out the name on the big liner's bow, *Dunnotar Castle.* One of her crewmen

waved. I turned to the old man.

"So, Mother is worried."

"Yes." He stared at me. "Do you know your job? Know it well?"

I thought back over my training, over my dealings with the *Maniwaki* as she completed. One four-inch, two twenty-millimeters, six Lewis guns, ammunition, procedure, personnel. Training us. The unexpected. Chance. Luck.

"I think so. I'll give a good account of myself."

"I'm sure you will." He reached into his pocket and came out with something hidden in his hand. "You'll wait here? I have to do something."

I nodded. He smiled, and stepped through a hatchway into the superstructure, leaving me on deck. I watched the *Dunnotar Castle* drift slowly, silently into the dock. A billion square miles of ocean out there, full of U-boats, mines, bombers, bad weather, accidents. I looked along the dock at the ranks of corvettes and trawlers, each in its pool of light. The law of averages. Father appeared in the open hatchway.

"What are you thinking about Robert?"

I shrugged. "Just the job, all of this. Are you finished?"

"Yes."

"What was that all about?"

He smiled. "I told your mother that nothing would happen to you." I waited for him to complete the thought, but he just headed for the gangway.

"Dad?"

He paused, looked back, and indicated the ship with a wave of his hand. "You'll have a good watch. I'll see you in the morning before the ceremony." He stared at me, as if daring me to speak.

"Hey. . . ."

"Was there something else?"

"Yes," I said, exasperated. "Why did you come down here tonight?"

"I told you. Your mother was worried. . . ."

"So?"

"So, I told her I would give the ship my blessing. I have done so."

"And you had to come all the way down here, tonight, to do that?"

"Yes. Have a good evening." And then, the smallest, barest acknowledgment of my curiosity. "We'll talk about it later." And he was gone, clumping down the gangway.

Of course we never did. Commissioning Day I was too busy to ask, and he did not volunteer the information, just stood proudly by with Mother as Commodore Barnes read us into commission and Father Revand blessed the ship. Then there were introductions all around, a brief tour (corvettes are small), and the band playing us out as we slipped our moorings and made for the Admiralty Dock to load stores and ammunition. Then two weeks with Fleet Training Command: firing at targets, stalking

imaginary submarines, and learning how to keep station. I got home twice in that period, for a few hours each. Father was away on shift both times. And, on November 15, 1940, in the midst of a blowing flurry, HMCS *Maniwaki*, junior ship of the Fifteenth Escort Group, took station as part of the close escort for Convoy HX49.

In those days, without fleet oilers to give us extra legs, we ran out only as far as The Approaches, where we'd pick up an inbound convoy. ON convoys of fast ships ran to Halifax, the slow ONS convoys to Sydney, and we were routed back with ONS 22. There followed a run to Ivigtut, two patrol sweeps off the Grand Banks, and a long escort of the liner *Prince Rupert* to Boston. Then we had a rescue call (never did find the ship), fishery protection duty, and another run to Sydney. It wasn't until late February of 1941 that we again made port at Halifax and I was able to visit home. Mother was delighted to see me.

"Things have been fine," she assured me, "though your father is driving me starkers. He'll be delighted to see you. He's upstairs. Why don't you go up and wake the big baby? It's time for his feeding."

"What's he doing home? They shift him to nights?"

A look crossed my mother's face — a shadow of remorse or guilt — then it was gone. "No," she answered. "He's got the flu."

"Dad? Sick?"

"Well, he insists he's fine, but the supervisor sent him home. Doesn't want him giving it to the rest of the shift."

The old man was propped up in a nest of pillows, reading Jules Verne. He frowned at me. "So, Captain Nemo is home from the sea. You couldn't write more often?"

"Six letters," I said. "Six times I made port. And Nemo was a submariner. I hunt submarines, remember?"

"So, tell me about submarines."

I had seen no submarines, but I told him about patrols, about convoys, about escort duty. How the towline parted and broke our radio aerial when we attempted to tow a disabled whaler off Cape Breton. About the burning oiler we had come upon with no one aboard. About the two men we had lost at sea in a storm, miraculously found alive by a fishing boat hours later. How the *Ingersoll*, a sister ship, had vanished without a trace. About the food, the drills, the rumors, the regulations.

The old man ate up every word. It seemed to revitalize him, and he asked a thousand questions, some of them silly but most of them pertinent, reasoned, interesting. On more than a few, he stumped me, and I promised him that I would find out the answers and tell him when next I came home. You couldn't say anything in the mails. Wartime censors were too quick to strike it out.

By the time my forty-eight was up,

Father was well and back at the yard. I told Mother that I expected to be home in a week, now that we were once again home-ported in Halifax, but the Admiralty had other ideas. Canadian ship production was starting to climb ahead of local needs, and it was decided to send the excess where they could do the most good. So, on March 3rd, eight corvettes of the Fifteenth and Seventeenth escort groups, accompanied by the oiler *Aldersdale*, set sail for Londonderry, Ireland.

We began to see action: aircraft, submarines, moored and drifting mines. By May we were down to five. U-boats had claimed *Listowel* and *Renfrew*, and the *Meaford* had been run down and sunk by a Greek freighter. Mother's letters and mine crossed in transit when they got through at all. Mine were full of false good cheer, forced patriotism, and such bits of news as I could slip past the censor. Mother was far more disturbing.

Father had come down with a fever. At first he had ignored it, but it began to affect his work. He lost weight, slept poorly, and sweated heavily when he did sleep. Finally, in June, he had to leave work. Mother began to close her letters with the phrase "I pray that your ship will return home," but somehow I did not make the connection. I was too busy just staying alive.

In June, Hitler invaded Russia. Suddenly convoys were running north, and the Americans, still ostensibly neutral, occupied Iceland to supply a jumping-off point. In August our remaining three ships sailed for Hvalfjordur.

Iceland is cold in the winter and deadly boring in summer. The locals didn't like us, we were in need of a refit, and every day there were rumors of orders: to Sydney, to St. John's, to Quebec. To Halifax. It became a chore just to get through the day, and alcohol began to become for us, like the Icelanders, a salvation. We were starting to come apart.

Lieutenant Colleran, our skipper, found me at dusk where I usually went when the ship was in port. The fantail. I was sitting on the depth charges with my feet on the rail, watching them turn the lights on aboard the *Wasp*. The big carrier was anchored in the roadstead, maintaining the American presence as official protectors of neutral Iceland, a fiction no one believed. There seemed to be more American ships in port every day, and Hitler had ordered his U-boats to attack them on sight. Under the circumstances I could hardly blame him.

"Don't get up, Lannes," Colleran drawled. I didn't.

"Consider yourself saluted, sir."

"Right."

Colleran leaned over the rail and looked at the ships strung out over the flat expanse of bay, something he could have done just as easily from

the bridge. Or from the Officers' Pub on the dock, for that matter. We had been together full-time for almost eleven months now, and had stopped paying social calls on each other. It was enough just to get through the day. Comradeship had turned to teamwork, teamwork to unspeaking drudgery. All that now remained of glory was the will to survive.

"You wanted to see me, sir?"

Colleran grunted. "We're sailing at 0430 to take out a convoy. Out and back home. Here home." He spat into the water.

"Any chance of getting a run to Canada in the near future?"

He looked uncomfortable. "Not for us. I guess I'd better learn to speak the local bloody tongue. I think we'll be here forever. Robert. . . ."

I turned to look in his direction. He was pulling a folded piece of paper from his pocket. He handed it to me. "See me about this when we get back tomorrow night, and I'll see what I can do."

When he'd gone, I unfolded the telegram. It was from Mother. PLEASE COME HOME, it read. YOUR FATHER IS DYING.

We sailed on the tide with HMCS *Simcoe* and two old ex-American destroyers for company. The third corvette was leaking through her shaft alley and had to be left behind. She would not be missed. It was a milk run. Take Convoy RH7 — sixty ships — out for a day, then come home. But the first U-boat was waiting just twenty miles out.

A torpedo hit an empty Dutch tanker that had been lagging behind, and we dropped back to take off the crew. It was just what the U-boat skipper was waiting for.

It was my job to rig the boarding nets, and I was amidships, urging on the men, when I saw the torpedo. It appeared out of the patch of fog on our starboard bow. It was the first I had ever seen, and I marveled at how slowly it ran, but it didn't have to be fast. We were almost stopped.

"Turn ship!" I cried to Colleran, who was standing on the bridge wing.

"Full ahead, hard astarboard!" he ordered. The *Maniwaki* gave a shudder and began to respond — slowly at first, but she was turning. I could hear the whine of the torpedo as we swung about, desperately trying to clear the speeding missile, which passed within inches down our starboard side and hit the steel guard above the screw.

I was thrown forward into a stanchion and went down, deafened by the explosion, but though my eyes flooded with a painful blackness, I did not pass out, but shook myself loose from a tangle of netting and staggered to my feet.

The after third of the ship was gone, turned to twisted junk by the blast that sheered off our stern. Mirac-

ulously the depth charges had not gone off.

"Number One," Colleran was screaming. "Get me a damage report, and have the boats and rafts readied." Pierce, the exec, raced aft. The skipper then leaned over the rail and pointed at me. "You, Guns. Man the four-inch. If he's still around, he may come back to finish us off."

In a pig's eye, I thought. I'd use another torpedo. But I headed forward, rounding up my gunners as I went. We broke out the ready ammunition and sent a man up the masthead. Then we waited. Presently, Mr. Pierce came by with his clipboard and asked how we were. I shrugged.

"Damnedest thing," he said, peering nervously out into the fog. "When the blast cut off our stern, it folded the remaining bulkheads in and plugged the opening, tight as a Reykjavík virgin. We're not even leaking."

"Casualties?"

"A broken arm, some bruises, temporary deafness. . . ."

"Yeah, and. . . ."

Pierce grinned. "That's all. No dead. No missing."

"Lucky," grunted one of the gunners.

"Beyond lucky, if you ask me," Pierce barked, as if challenging anyone to disagree with him. The men grinned at each other, as much from relief at being alive as in reaction to the first lieutenant, who was already on his way to the bridge to deliver the miraculous news to the captain.

"I'd say someone is watching over us, sir," one of the gunners ventured. I nodded, scanning the drifting fogbanks. Well, they'd better keep watching. I remembered my father's words. Protect.

We drifted the rest of the day, the sinking tanker lost in the confusion, the rest of the convoy gone on. Our radio was out; and with no engines, we were helpless. There was nothing to do but wait and watch.

At dusk the submarine came.

The masthead lookout spotted a shape in the distance, quickly obscured, and seconds later came the boom and whistle of a shell passing overhead.

"Steady on, Guns," Colleran called. "Don't fire until you can see him."

He fired five times, one of the shells falling close enough to wet down the bridge, before the fogbank parted and showed us where he was.

Our first shot pitched twenty yards behind him.

The second fell ten short.

The third struck the base of his conning tower, igniting the ready ammunition.

"Jesus-God!" the chief gunner muttered as the conning tower blew off. Then she just rolled over and sank. There were no survivors.

I stood down the fout-inch crew and made my way to report. Colleran

was congratulatory, but looking very worried.

"Barometer's falling, Guns. We'll be lucky to ride out the night."

Since I am telling you this story, and since I already stated that the *Maniwaki* came home, you know that she did survive the night. However, it was not one night she survived, but four. Four nights of the worst Atlantic storm in memory. Four nights that cleaned the decks, crumpled the pilothouse, and wrecked every weapon and instrument aboard. Four nights that reduced a damaged ship to a pile of floating junk. But still floating.

And the crew? We were mightily sick, beaten, wet, shivering, and most of us wanted to die, but when the weather cleared on the fourth day and the tug *Foundation Pelican* found us drifting off Cape Race, every man had survived.

Protect.

My breathing had grown hoarse and shallow as I saw him approach through the fog, sticking along on his cane, his legs bowed painfully. He stopped twice to catch his breath, his body wracked with cough. He bore no resemblance to the strong, vital, red-faced man who had sent me off at our commissioning. My father had aged a hundred years.

But he shook my hand off when I went to help him, and gazed at me with eyes the color of wet steel.

"You got home."

"Yes," I replied. And I have a feel-

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ing that I knew what it cost. He stumbled past me up the gangway, but stopped short of stepping on the deck, gave a low whistle, and turned back to me.

"A good ship," he said. "I built a good ship."

"Yes."

"You wait here."

He disappeared into the vitals of the torn corvette, and I heard him banging about. I was on the verge of going after him, when he stepped through the hatchway and motioned me back.

"To the dock. Go," he croaked. "I'm all right."

I dutifully retreated and watched him make his way across the metal gangway, one hand clutched tightly shut, the other clinging to the rail, his eyes closed. His lips were moving soundlessly, but when he stepped down to the dock, there came a low moan, like a sigh of relief. The *Maniwaki* gave a shudder then, like a horse that had been run to death, and tipped over against the pier. With a snapping of lines, she settled below the surface, leaving only bubbles and swirling water. Father sighed, then opened his hand to show me what lay within: a small, pear-shaped stone on a leather thong. He smiled.

"I'll be better now. Let's go home."

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A SACRED POET

I heard once that the oratory of William Jennings Bryan, the populist leader of the Democratic party in the first decade of this century, was likened to the North Platte river of his home state, Nebraska. His oratory, they said, like the river, "was two miles wide and a foot deep."

Well, last night I met a very amiable and likeable gentleman who had spent decades in researching a particular subject, and the result was that his knowledge was, in my opinion, two miles deep, but only a foot wide.

He gave a talk and, in the question-and-answer session that followed, I had a little set-to with him. Twice I tried to make my point, and twice he drowned me in irrelevant chatter. When I tried a third time, with a ringing, "Nevertheless—" the moderator stopped me for fear I would forget my manners and offend the man.

In the course of the few things I *did* have a chance to say, however, I quoted the Latin poet, Horace. No, I didn't quote him in Latin because I am not that kind of scholar, but I quoted him in English, which was good enough. The quotation goes as follows:

"Many brave men lived before Agamemnon, but all are overwhelmed in eternal night, unwept, unknown, because they lack a sacred poet."

By this (which, by the way, was

quite apropos of the point I was trying to make) Horace meant that not all Agamemnon's deeds and heroism and high rank would have helped him live in memory had it not been that Homer wrote the *Iliad*. It was the poet's work and not the hero's that lived in memory.

Though I didn't get to make my point as I wished, the quote remained in my mind, and it led me to the following essay, which will be quite unlike any I have offered you for, lo, these many years. Be patient with me, for I am going to discuss poetry.

Let me make a few things plain, first. I am no expert on poetry. I have a certain facility with parodies and limericks, but there it stops.

Nor do I pretend to any ability at judging the worth of poetry. I can't tell a good poem from a bad one, and I have never had the impulse to be a "critic."

So what am I going to talk about when I discuss poetry? Why, something that doesn't require judgement or poetic understanding, or even critical ability (if there should be such a thing).

I want to talk about the *effect* of poetry. Some poems have an effect on the world and some poems don't. It has nothing to do with being good or bad. That is a subjective decision, and I imagine there will always and eternally be disagreements on such a matter. But there can't be any disagreement about a poem's effectiveness.

Let me give you an example:

In 1797, the infant United States built its first warships. One of them, built in Boston, was the *Constitution*. The ship had a brief workout when France and the United States had a minor unofficial naval war in 1798.

The real test came in 1812, when the United States went to war with Great Britain for a second time. This war started with a humiliation on land. General William Hull, an utter incompetent, surrendered Detroit to the British virtually without a blow. (Hull was court-martialed and condemned to death for this, but was granted a reprieve because of his services in the Revolutionary War.)

What saved American morale in those difficult first months was the feats of our small Navy, which took on the proud British men-of-war and knocked them for a loop. The *Constitution* was under the command of William Hull's younger brother, Isaac Hull. On July 18, 1812, the *Constitution* met up with the British *Guerriere* ("Warrior"), and in two and a half hours riddled it into a Swiss cheese so that it had to be sunk.

On December 19, the *Constitution*, under a new captain, destroyed another British warship off the coast of Brazil. In this second battle, the British cannonballs bounced off the seasoned timbers of the *Constitution's* hull, doing no damage, and the crew cheered the sight. One cried out that the ship's sides were made of iron. The ship was at once named "Old Ironsides," and it has been known by that name ever since, to the point where I imagine few people remember its real name.

Well, ships grow old, and by 1830 Old Ironsides was obsolete. It had done its work and it was going to be scrapped. The Navy was ready to scrap it for it had far better ships now. Congress wasn't anxious to spend any more money on it, so the scrapping looked good. There were some sentimentalists who thought the ship ought to be preserved as a national treasure, but who cares about a few soft-headed jerks. Besides, you can't fight City Hall, the saying goes.

In Boston, however, there lived a 21-year-old youngster named Oliver Wendell Holmes. He had just graduated from Harvard, he was planning to study medicine, and he had dashed off reams of poetry. In fact, his fellow students had named him "class poet."

Holmes wrote a poem entitled "Old Ironsides." Perhaps you know it. Here's the way it goes:

Ay, tear her tattered ensign down!
Long has it waved on high,
And many an eye has danced to see
That banner in the sky;
Beneath it rung the battle shout,
And burst the cannon's roar—
The meteor of the ocean air
Shall sweep the clouds no more.

Her deck, once red with heroes' blood,
Where knelt the vanquished foe,
When winds were hurrying o'er the flood,
And waves were white below,
No more shall feel the victor's tread,
Or know the conquered knee—
The harpies of the shore shall pluck
The eagle of the sea!

• • •

Oh, better that her shattered hulk
Should sink beneath the wave;
Her thunders shook the mighty deep,
And there should be her grave;
Nail to the mast her holy flag,
Set every threadbare sail,
And give her to the god of storms,
The lightning and the gale!

The poem was published on September 14, 1830 and was quickly reprinted everywhere.

Is the poem a good one? I don't know. For all I know, critics will say it is mawkish and overblown, and that its images are melodramatic. Perhaps. I only know that I have never been able to read it aloud with a steady voice, particularly when I get to the parts about the harpies and about the threadbare sails. I can't even read it to myself, as I did just now, without gulping and finding it difficult to see the paper.

To critics, that may make me an object of scorn and derision, but the fact is that I'm not, and wasn't, the only one. Wherever that poem appeared, a sudden roar of protest arose from the public. Everyone began contributing money to help save Old Ironsides. The school children brought their pennies to school. There was no stopping it. The Navy and the Congress found themselves facing an aroused public and discovered that it wasn't Old Ironsides that was battling the god of storms; *they* were.

They gave in at once. Old Ironsides was *not* scrapped. It was *never* scrapped. It still exists, resting immovable in Boston Harbor, where it will continue to exist indefinitely.

It was not Old Ironside's feats of war that saved it. It was that it had a sacred poet. Good or bad, the poem was *effective*.

The War of 1812 gave us a poem called "The Defense of Fort McHenry," which was published on September 14, 1814 and was quickly renamed "The Star-Spangled Banner."

It's our national anthem, now. It's difficult to sing (even professional singers have trouble, sometimes), and the words don't flow freely. Most Americans, however patriotic, know only the first line. (I am rather proud of the fact that I know, and can sing without hesitation, all four stanzas.)

All *four* stanzas? Every Fourth of July, the *New York Times* prints the

music and all the words of the anthem, and try as you might, you will count only three stanzas. Why? Because during World War II, the government abolished the third stanza as too bloodthirsty.

Remember that the poem was written in the aftermath of the British bombardment of Fort McHenry in Baltimore Harbor. If the fort's guns had been silenced, then the British ships could have disembarked the soldiers they carried. Those soldiers would surely have taken Baltimore and split the nation (which was still hugging the seacoast) in two. Those soldiers had already sacked Washington, which was a small hick town of no importance. Baltimore was an important port.

In the course of the night, the ships' guns fell silent, and to Francis Scott Key, on board one of the British ships (trying to get the release of a friend), the whole question was whether the American guns had been silenced and knocked out, or whether the British ships had given up the bombardment. Once the dawn came, the answer would be plain — it would depend on whether the American flag or the British flag was flying over the fort.

The first stanza asks, then, whether the American flag is still flying. The second stanza tells us it *is* still flying. The third stanza is a paean of unashamed triumph and here it is:

> And where is that band who so vauntingly swore
> That the havoc of war and the battle's confusion,
> A home and a country should leave us no more?
> Their blood has washed out their foul footsteps' pollution.
> No refuge could save the hireling and slave
> From the terror of flight, or the gloom of the grave:
> And the star-spangled banner in triumph doth wave
> O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave.

Good poetry? Who knows? Who cares? If you know the tune, sing it. Get the proper scorn into "foul footsteps," the proper hatred into "hireling and slave," the proper sadistic glee into the "terror of flight, or the gloom of the grave" and you'll realize that it rouses passions a little too strongly. But who knows, there are times when you may want those passions.

I should point out that music plays its part, too. Sing a poem and the effect is multiplied manifold.

Consider the American Civil War. For over two years, the Union

suffered one disaster after another in Virginia. The muttonheads who ran the Union army were, one after the other, no match for Robert E. Lee and Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson. Those were the best soldiers the United States ever produced, and, as fate would have it, they fought their greatest battles against the United States.

Why did the North continue to fight? The South was ready to stop at any time. The North needed only to agree to leave the South alone, and the war would be over. But the North continued to fight through one bloody debacle after another. One of the reasons for that was the character of President Abraham Lincoln, who would not quit under any circumstances — but another was that the North was moved by a religious fervor.

Consider "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." It's a march, yes, but not a war march. It is God, not man, who is marching. The key word in the title is "hymn," not "battle," and it is (or should be) always sung slowly and with the deepest emotion.

Julia Ward Howe, who wrote the words (to the well known tune of "John Brown's Body"), had just visited the camps of the Army of the Potomac in 1862 and was very moved. It must surely have expressed a great deal of what many Northerners felt. There are five stanzas to the poem, and most Americans today barely know the first, but during the Civil War all five were known. Here is the fifth:

In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,
With a glory in His bosom that transfigures you and me:
As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free,
While God is marching on.

"Let us die to make men free!" I don't say that everyone in the North had that fervor, but some did, and the words may have swayed those on the borderline. After all, *something* kept the northern armies fighting through disaster after disaster, and the Battle Hymn was surely one of the factors.

And if slavery moved some Northerners as an evil that must be fought and destroyed at any cost, there were other Northerners to whom the Union was a benefit that must be supported and preserved at any cost, and there was a song for that, too.

The worst defeat suffered by the Union was in December, 1862, when the unspeakable General Ambrose Burnside, perhaps the most

incompetent general ever to lead an American army into battle, sent his soldiers against an impregnable redoubt manned by the Confederate army. Wave after wave of the Union army surged forward, and wave after wave was cut down.

It was after that battle that Lincoln said, "If there is a worse place than Hell, then I am in it." He also remarked of Burnside on a later occasion that he "could snatch defeat from the very jaws of victory."

But, the story goes, as the Northern army lay in camp that night trying to recover, someone struck up a new song that had been written by George Frederick Root, who had already written "Tramp! Tramp! Tramp! the boys are marching." This time he had come up with something called "The Battle Cry of Freedom."

The only words I know of this song are a few I picked up here and there, and I will quote them, with the hope that they won't be too incorrect. (If anyone knows all the words, please send them to me.)

Yes, we'll rally round the flag, boys, we'll rally once again,
 Shouting the battle cry of Freedom.
We will rally from the hillside, we'll gather from the plain,
 Shouting the battle cry of Freedom.
The Union forever! Hurrah, boys, hurrah!
Down with the traitor, and up with the star!
And we'll rally round the flag, boys, we'll rally once again,
 Shouting the battle cry of Freedom.

Even I, with my tin ear, have a sneaking suspicion that this is not great poetry, or even adequate poetry, but (the story continues) a Confederate officer hearing those distant strains from the defeated army, gave up hope at that moment. He felt that a defeated army that could still sing that song about "the Union forever" would never be finally defeated, but would keep coming back to the assault again and again and would never give up till the Confederacy was worn out and could fight no more. —And he was right.

There's something about words and music together that have an amazing effect.

There's an ancient Greek story, for instance, that may conceivably be true (the Greeks never spoiled a story by worrying over the facts of the case). According to it, the Athenians, fearful of a loss in a forthcoming battle, sent to the oracle at Delphi for advice. The oracle advised them

to ask the Spartans to lend them one soldier.

The Spartans did not like to defy the oracle, so they gave the Athenians one soldier but, not particularly anxious to help a rival city to victory, were careful not to give Athens a general or a renowned fighter. They handed the Athenians a lame regimental musician. And at the battle, the Spartan musician played and sang such stirring music that the Athenians, cheering, advanced on the enemy at a run and swept the field.

Then there's the story (probably also apocryphal) of an event that took place in the Soviet Union, during the Nazi invasion, when a group of German soldiers, meticulously dressed in Soviet uniforms, marched into Soviet-held territory in order to carry out an important sabotage mission. A young boy, seeing them pass, hastened to the nearest Soviet army post and reported a group of German soldiers dressed in Soviet uniforms. The Nazis were rounded up and, I presume, given the treatment routinely accorded spies.

The boy was then asked, "How did you know those were German soldiers, and not Soviet soldiers?"

And the boy replied, "They weren't singing."

For that matter, did you ever see John Gilbert in "The Big Parade," a silent movie about World War I? Gilbert has no intention of being caught up in war hysteria and joining the army, but his car is stopped by a parade passing by — men in uniform, the flag flying, instruments blowing and banging away.

It's a silent movie, so you don't hear any words, you don't hear any music (except the usual piano accompanist), you don't hear any cheering. You see only Gilbert's face behind the wheel, cynically amused. But he has to stay there till the parade is done, and after a moment one of Gilbert's feet is tapping out the time, then both feet are, then he's beginning to look excited and eager and — of course — he gets out of the car to enlist. Without hearing a thing, you find it completely convincing. That *is* how people get caught up and react.

I can give you a personal experience of my own. As you probably can guess from what I've already said, I am not only a Civil War buff, but with respect to that war, I'm an ardent Northern patriot. "The Union forever," that's me.

But once when I was driving from New York to Boston, alone in my car, I was listening to a series of Civil War songs on the car radio. One song I had never heard before and I've never heard since. It was a

Confederate song from a desperate time, and it was pleading for the South to unite and, with all its strength, throw back the Yankee invaders. By the time the song was over, I was in utter distress knowing that the war had ended over a century before and that there was no Confederate recruiting station to which I could run and volunteer.

Insidious, the power these things have.

During the Crimean war, with Great Britain and France fighting Russia, the British commanding general, Baron Raglan, gave a command that was so ambiguous and was accompanied by a gesture that was so uncertain that nobody knew exactly what he meant. Because no one dared say, "That's crazy," the order ended by sending 607 men and horses of the Light Brigade charging pell-mell into the main Russian army. In twenty minutes, half the men and horses were casualties and, of course, nothing was accomplished.

The commander of the French contingent, Pierre Bosquet, stared in disbelief as the men rode their horses into the mouth of cannons and said, "C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas la guerre." Freely translated, he was saying, "That's all very nice, but that's not the way you fight a war."

However, Alfred, Lord Tennyson wrote a poem about it, that starts with the familiar:

Half a league, half a league
Half a league onward;
All in the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred

He wrote a total of 55 lines in a rhythm that mimicked perfectly the sound of galloping horses. Read it properly, and you'll think you're one of the horsemen careening forward on that stupid charge.

Tennyson didn't actually hide the fact that it was a mistake. He says:

"Forward the Light Brigade!"
Was there a man dismayed?
Not though the soldier knew
Someone had blundered:
Theirs not to make reply
Theirs not to reason why,
Theirs but to do and die:

Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred."

The result is that, thanks to the poem, everyone thinks of the Charge in its heroic aspect, and no one thinks of it as an example of criminally inept generalship.

Sometimes a poem totally distorts history and keeps it distorted, too.

In 1775, the British controlled Boston while dissident colonials were concentrated at Concord. General Gage, the British commander, sent a contingent of soldiers to confiscate the arms and powder that was being stored at Concord and to arrest Samuel Adams and John Hancock who were the ringleaders of dissent.

Secrets weren't kept well, and colonial sympathizers in Boston set out to ride through the night to warn Adams and Hancock to make themselves scarce, and to warn the people in Concord to hide the arms and powder. Two of the riders were Paul Revere and William Dawes. They took different routes but got to Lexington. Adams and Hancock were staying there and, on hearing the news, quickly rode out of town.

Revere and Dawes then went on to Concord, but were stopped by a British patrol and were arrested. That was it for both of them. Neither one of them ever got to Concord. Neither of them gave the vital warning to the men of Concord.

However, in Lexington, Revere and Dawes had been joined by a young doctor named Samuel Preston, who was still awake because he had been with a woman, doing what I suppose a man and woman would naturally do when alone late at night.

He buttoned his pants and joined the two. *He* avoided the British patrol and managed to get to Concord. *He* got the Concord people roused and ready, with the arms parcelled out for defense.

The next day, when the British stormed their way through Lexington and got to Concord, the "minute-men" were waiting for them behind their trees, guns in hand. The British just barely made it back to Boston, and the War of the American Revolution had begun.

Lexington-and-Concord remained famous forever after, but the business about people riding to give warning was drowned out somehow. No one knew it.

In 1863, however, the Civil War was at its height and the North was still looking for its great turning-point victory (which was to come at Gettysburg in July of that year). Henry Wadsworth Longfellow felt the

urge to write a patriotic ballad to hearten the Union side, so he dug up the old tale no one remembered and wrote a poem about the warning ride in the night.

And he ended it with a mystical evocation of the ghost of that rider:

"Through all our history, to the last,
In the hour of darkness and peril and need,
The people will waken and listen to hear
The hurrying hoof-beats of that steed,
And the midnight message of Paul Revere."

The poem proved immensely popular, and very heartening to its readers with its implication that the ghosts of the past were fighting on the side of the Union.

But there was an important flaw in it. Longfellow mentioned only Paul Revere, who after all, had never completed the job. It was *Preston* who warned Concord.

And did you ever hear of Preston? Did anyone ever hear of Preston? Of course not. Preston's role is no secret. Any reasonable history book, any decent encyclopedia will tell you about it.

But what people know is not history, not encyclopedias, but:

"Listen, my children, and you shall hear
Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere—"

That's the power of a poem, even (if you'll forgive my tin ear and let me make a judgement) of a rotten poem like "Paul Revere's Ride!"



Edward Shaver ("Stones," November 1986) offers a new story about the crew of a ship that returns to Earth after years in space and finds the joy of homecoming replaced by a gnawing fear that something at home is dreadfully wrong. . .

The Gods Arrive

BY
EDWARD F. SHAVER

Heartily know,
When half-gods go,
The gods arrive. . . .
— Ralph Waldo Emerson

The navigator cursed quietly in the cramped shadows of the sextant bay, blinking sweat from his eyes as he tried to lock the cross hairs on the shifting pinpoint of Canopus.

"You should be able to do it in your sleep by now, Kern." The woman's voice came soft and taunting from behind him.

Robertson held his breath as the cross hairs settled on their target, punching a button that sent the coordinates to the navigation computer. He released his handhold on the bulkhead, letting his body perform a graceful, weightless turn toward his audience of one.

Dana Clark was stretched languidly across the entrance to the sextant bay, the thin nylon of her bodysuit shimmering faintly. Her long brown hair was free of its usual braids, and now it swept around her shoulders like the mane of an angry lion.

"Are we still on course?" she asked with a smile that showed little concern for the question.

"I hope," Robertson shrugged, and tried unsuccessfully to stifle his own smile. "I guess we wouldn't want to miss our own ticker-tape parade, now, would we?"

"Come on, Kern." Dana tapped her foot against a partition and came gliding into the bay. She placed a firm hand on Robertson's shoulder, turning him back toward the window as she crowded close beside him.

"Look," she ordered, her hair sur-

rounding them both. "That's *Earth* . . . less than two days away. You should be happy now, like the rest of us. I think I even caught Commander Shueman smiling at dinner. Why can't you? Surely you aren't regretting that two years in this tin can are almost over?"

"Of course not," Robertson answered quickly, more irritated at himself than at the woman.

He stared out at the clouded sphere of Earth, letting his imagination have momentary reign. For an instant he thought he could actually see the planet growing larger as they hurtled down the last smooth curve of the Hohman orbit that was bringing them home.

Home.

He repeated it again to himself, waiting for the flood of euphoria that should have been there. And then another memory dropped from its lair, like a dream-beast pouncing on its ethereal prey.

Happy Birthday. . . .

"It's hard to explain," Robertson mumbled finally, darting an evasive glance at the woman, "I know only that something's wrong. . . ."

Dana frowned, studying Robertson's face for a long moment before she let her gaze stray out the viewing port.

"Wrong?" she asked slowly. "Wrong with the ship?"

"No." Robertson shook his head quickly.

"Then what, Kern? What could be wrong when we're only two days from home after two years in space?" She faced him again, her frown melting quickly into a secret smile. "I think that all you need is a little diversion, Navigator." Her eyes sparkled in the Earthlight as she tugged at the Velcro fasteners on the front of her bodysuit.

"Science Officer Clarke," Robertson protested weakly. "You know what happened the last time the commander caught you out of uniform on the Control Deck."

"Yes," Dana answered as she wriggled her slender frame out of the garment and let it drift slowly away. "But the commander is asleep. And in another two days he won't be the commander at all. And making love in zero-g is the one experience that would *almost* make me go back to Mars. . . ."

"Brace for contact," Commander Warren Shueman announced quietly, concentrating on the computer-generated image of the docking port. From behind him came the rustling of harnesses as the other five crew members of the *Argos* prepared to dock with the waiting shuttle.

"*Now*," Shueman warned.

As if in answer, the *Argos* shuddered and squealed with the kiss of metal. Shueman punched a button on the control panel, and the firm jolt of the docking latches put an end to the mating of the two spacecraft.

"Houston," Shueman said. "Docking complete. Tell your crew on the shuttle to put the beer on ice."

"Amen," chimed Dwight Duvall as he released his harness and launched himself toward the front of the cockpit. "A bit rough on the stick there, Commander. I put the damned lander down on *Chryse Planitia* a lot softer than that." He laughed aloud as he slapped Shueman on the shoulder.

In the couch next to Shueman's, Andra Thorn relaxed away from the console. She had been trained as first officer for the mission, whose main responsibility would be to take Shueman's place had it been necessary during the two years in space. She had been by his side during every critical maneuver, waiting for him to make his first mistake. She smiled now with the realization that it had finally come in a minor key as the final act of the mission.

"A nice ride, Commander," Thorn nodded quietly. "All the way and back again."

"A *beautiful* ride!" corrected Medical Officer Christine Lakehurst. She was hovering behind Duvall, still clutching hands with Dana Clarke. "No one could have done it better, Commander."

"Docking confirmed, *Argos*," said the distant voice of Mission Control. "You may begin hatch release and transfer to the shuttle immediately as per docking procedures. Over."

"Screw them," Duvall said with a grand wave of his hand. "We've been working our asses off for two years straight. Let somebody else do the work for a change. We're ready to *celebrate*." With that he plucked Christine Lakehurst from the grasp of the science officer and drew her into a twirling somersault.

"Houston," Shueman smiled wearily. "Couldn't you give us some help on this one? It's been a long trip home, and I may have a mutiny on my hands. Over."

But the commander's smile faded as the radio answered tersely, "Negative, *Argos*. Begin hatch release and transfer immediately. Over."

The jubilation died away in the cabin, escaping like the air from a punctured balloon. It was replaced by a chorus of angry protest from everyone except the navigator. Robertson remained strapped to his couch, listening from behind closed eyes as the gnawing fear growled to life in his stomach.

"Damn it," Shueman snapped after a short and unsuccessful battle with his instincts. "You guys don't know when to close the damned book, do you? Is Jack Wright there? I want him on the channel. Over."

Jack Wright was the senior member in the brotherhood and sisterhood of astronauts; a relic of the days of Apollo, and the last man in the service who'd left his footprints on the Moon. He hadn't flown a mission in fifteen years, and wouldn't ever fly

again, but his name remained on the active duty roster in deference to his stature. And because he knew everybody who was anybody in the program, Jack Wright was a man who could get things done without the need for the usual bureaucratic exercises.

"*Argos*," Houston answered after another pause. "Jack Wright is at Kennedy in Florida. It would take a special patch, and we're not sure he's even available. . . ."

"Jack Wright hasn't missed the end of a mission in twenty years," Shueman interrupted impatiently. "He wouldn't start now. If he's alive, then he's at Control at Kennedy, and I want him on the line, Houston. *Over*."

Shueman spit the last word into the microphone and then shifted back in the couch. He could feel the tension in the five people clustered around, and he silently credited each for their professionalism. They might have offered some protest at a delay when the end of the journey beckoned from the other side of a docking hatch, but they held their peace. They might not be a crew for much longer, but they would remain crew until the end.

"*Argos*," came a voice, familiar even over the rasp of the radio. "This is Jack Wright."

"Jack," Shueman answered quickly. "What's this bullshit about the damned procedures? We've been flying by the book for a long time, and I think we deserve a break. Over."

"Roger that, *Argos*," Wright answered, but his words were slow and measured, as if weighted down by what remained to be said. "It's just that we've got a problem that's forced some changes in the procedures, Commander. Over."

This time it was Shueman who let the silence linger as he tried to read between the words that Wright had offered.

"What kind of problem, Jack?" the commander asked finally, hunching his shoulders against the stares of his crew.

Robertson opened his eyes, watching the others as they crowded close around Shueman and the main console. He listened to the empty hiss of the radio, letting the pieces tumble around in his head as he tried to guess which one would cross the boundary from imagination to reality.

"The worst kind of problem," Wright answered regretfully. "Biocontamination. I'm sorry, Warren."

"Oh God!" Dana whispered, turning back toward Robertson with a white mask of horror.

"Impossible!" Christine Lakehurst said angrily. "We've done all the tests by the book, Commander. From the first day you and Duvall got back from the surface. We're *clean*."

Shueman stared up at Lakehurst for a long moment before he drew a breath and said, "That was my medical officer, Jack. Did you copy? Over."

"I copied, Warren. And I wish it were as simple as that, but it's not. You'll find biological isolation garments on the other side of the hatch. Put them on. You'll also find that the shuttle is an empty bird, Warren. We couldn't take any chances. You'll have to fly it home by yourselves. . . ."

The shuttle dropped through the last layer of overcast, and suddenly the flat green landscape of Florida stretched away below them. Shueman shifted in the pilot's couch, his body already exhausted from carrying the weight of the isolation garment. After two years of zero-g interrupted only by seven days on the Martian surface, the suit felt like it weighed several tons. His arms were white, inflexible stumps that ached from the effort to reach the instrument panel, and the helmet formed an artificial horizon that forced him to shift his body to scan all readouts flickering on the computer screens.

Shueman took control of the stick for the last few hundred feet of descent, dropping the gear to the tarmac with a single jolt. In another minute they had rolled to a stop at the end of the runway, and Shueman shut down the engines with a final, satisfied flourish of gloved hands across the instrument panel.

"Kennedy, this is Shuttle One. We're down. Over." Shuemen shifted in his couch as he peered out through the windows of the cockpit. A breeze was moving through the overcast afternoon outside, stirring the tall grass that crowded close to the edge of the runway. But other than that, the vista was quiet and unbroken.

"Not even a lousy brass band," Duvall muttered, picking up the thought that was flashing through the commander's mind. "First humans to Mars, and you'd think all we'd done were take a Sunday jaunt around the block."

"They're afraid of us," Dana said quietly, her voice sounding like a thin reed through the radios of the isolation garments. "They're *afraid*. . . ."

"Shuttle One," interrupted the radio. "This is Mission Control, Kennedy. Nice landing, Commander. A transfer vehicle is moving into position now. As soon as a pressure seal has been put in place, you'll be asked to open the hutch of the shuttle. From there it will be a short ride to the Receiving Laboratory. Over."

Shueman frowned inside his helmet, his memory jogged by the nameless voice on the radio.

"Anderson?" he said slowly. "Is that Bill Anderson playing at CAPCOM?"

The radio hesitated for several long moments before it answered, "Roger that, Commander. It's been a long time since you and I brought one of those birds down."

"A few years," Shueman said, still frowning as he detected the reluctance in Anderson's voice. "Tell me,

Bill. How come nobody's waiting out here to wave one lousy flag? Over."

"If it were up to me, Commander. . . ." The voice trailed off uncertainly, and when it returned, the impassive veneer was back in place. "I've been told that all questions will have to wait for debrief, Commander. Please stand by."

Please shut up, Duvall translated under his breath as he listened to the end of the conversation. He followed Shueman's gaze out the port window, where a large white van was creeping slowly across the tarmac toward the shuttle.

The transfer to the van was accomplished without a glimpse of another human being. They sat silent under the bright fluorescent lighting: six beached whales too tired to speak as the van rumbled across the unseen landscape.

The end of the ten-minute ride was confirmed with a jolt and the clatter of metal, and soon the rush of air announced that yet another contamination seal was being put in place. With the final hiss, the door to the van was opened, and the crew of the *Argos* stared out through the open, empty doorway.

"Well, come on," Shueman grunted with an effort as he came to his feet. "We haven't gotten an engraved invitation yet, and I don't expect one now."

He led them out of the van, through a short tunnel of polished steel, and past the heavy pressure doors of the Receiving Laboratory. Duvall brought up the rear, and as soon as he'd struggled past the entrance with a sealed container of Martian rocks in each hand, the doors screeched a warning and began to close. Within thirty seconds they had joined to form a featureless wall of shining steel that reflected back the blurred visions of the six artificial snowmen.

"Welcome to the Receiving Laboratory," Jack Wright's voice came harshly through their headsets. "Dr. Lakehurst was briefed in detail on the layout prior to leaving Earth, so she'll be able to give you the tour. I suggest you find your respective quarters and get out of those BIGs. We've got a preliminary debrief scheduled in four hours." Then, with a final click, he was gone.

Shueman fumbled at the latch of his helmet, breathing an audible sigh as he lifted it free of his shoulders. The others quickly followed the commander's lead in shedding their suits, and Christine Lakehurst soon found herself the center of five expectant stares.

"Lead on, Christine," Shueman nodded. "This is your domain."

Christine drew a deep breath and dropped her suit in a pile on the floor, and then led them up the single corridor that opened off the entrance chamber.

"The Receiving Laboratory was designed as an emergency holding station," she began as they shuffled across the carpeted floor. "A first line of research if one or more of us had shown some signs of biological contamination on the return from Mars."

"Which brings up a good question, Doctor," Duvall intruded. "Just exactly who among us has been contaminated? These guys are pretty mysterious, and it kind of makes me think that somebody around here must know more than they're saying."

Duvall stopped in his tracks as Christine turned to face him. Her eyes were surrounded by the lines of a frown that were deepened by the harsh lighting, making her suddenly older than her thirty years.

"Is that an accusation?" she glared. "Are you saying that I've been holding out on you? That I've been keeping secrets?"

"You *are* the damned medical officer," Duvall shot back. "And we *are* being treated like the most potent stuff since the Black Death. You add it up."

Christine took a defiant step forward. "Damn you, Duvall. . . ."

"*Stow it*," Shueman ordered, putting a timbre in his voice he hadn't used since the early days of the mission. "We all have a lot of questions, and I hope most of them will be answered in the first debrief. We are *not* going to start bickering among ourselves in the meantime. Is that clear?" He swept his gaze quickly around the group, finishing with Duvall.

They each managed a quick nod of submission, and then Shueman motioned for Christine to continue.

The first doorway they passed was the entrance to a small kitchen, which shone in a glory of stainless-steel appliances. One side of the room consisted of shelves stacked floor to ceiling with small cans of gray and green.

"*K rations*," Duvall grimaced. "Can you believe it? We'd get better food in the state prison."

The next doorway opened on a laboratory that had been packed to the bursting point with test equipment. Directly across the corridor was a white-tiled room with six beds that might have been transplanted directly from the critical-care unit of any large hospital. Lakehurst moved on quickly, but each of the others paused to imagine themselves strapped to one of those beds, surrounded by the ominous machines that exuded an aura of pain and hopelessness.

In the following room they found a small library that housed several tiers of book-laden shelves, along with a microfiche reader that promised access to many thousands more. Next to the microfiche reader sat a small computer.

Finally the corridor emptied into a larger room that breathed the first

traces of the lives they'd left behind. The walls were painted a friendly yellow, matching the upholstery of several couches and chairs that were arrayed in the pattern of a make-believe living room. There were no windows, but one wall had been decorated with a floor-to-ceiling mural of a forest in autumn, and its sudden colors transfixed them all after two years in the drab green of the *Argos*.

"Jesus, it looks like a Holiday Inn," Duvall said to finally break the silence.

Lakehurst merely bristled at his humor and continued stiffly, "There are six bedrooms off the hallway on the other side of the living room. That's the entire facility, Commander."

"What about the debriefing?" Shueman asked.

"It takes place right here," Lakehurst answered, crossing the room and running a hand across a bare expanse of wall. "There's a Plexiglas panel behind the wall that can be opened from the outside for visual contact. All the rooms are wired for sight and sound. . . ." She motioned up into a corner of the ceiling, where a camera stared back unobtrusively. "So I suggest you all act with the proper decorum."

"A padded suite," Duvall grumbled. "With Big Brother thrown in for good measure."

"All right," Shueman nodded firmly. "If no one has any questions, I suggest that we all pick a room and get some sleep before the debrief." He glanced around the group, searching the faces for the sign of a question, but each of them shrugged and shuffled out of the room.

Except for Robertson.

He remained alone in the center of the living room, frowning as he searched among the details of the scene. He couldn't have said exactly why he knew the puzzle would begin to unravel right there in that forgery of a human dwelling; perhaps it was merely the echo of all the other half-mistakes that had set his instincts on edge in the beginning. Still he searched: past the cheap imitations of classic paintings, the vases of dusty plastic flowers, the plain glass ashtrays that adorned the coffee table.

Robertson stood for a long while in that private scrutiny, until suddenly the obvious made its way into focus. The breath escaped his lungs with a rush of fear and surprise, but even then he had to smile at the irony. He had stolen his first glimpse of the nightmare in the reflection of something that wasn't there at all. . . .

Christine was the last to return to the living room, dropping an armload of loose-leaf binders on the coffee table as she crumpled into a chair.

"Medical logs," she nodded wearily at Shueman, and the circle under her eyes betrayed the fact that she hadn't slept since their arrival.

"Do they say anything new?" he asked doubtfully.

"I went through everything again, Commander." Christine paused long enough to shoot a glance over at Duvall. "Every test and every result. We went by the book from start to finish, and if the book was right, then we're clean."

The rest of the crew shifted in their seats as they listened to the medical officer's proclamation. Duvall merely arched his eyebrows and turned to stare at the blank expanse of wall that still hid the only window to the outside. It was Shueman who finally broke the silence, expressing the thought that had already found a common home in each of them.

"What if the book was wrong?" he asked quietly, not expecting an answer.

The intercom crackled a moment later, and a section of the wall folded onto itself, revealing a long slab of darkness. Suddenly a row of spotlights flared to life in the darkness, bathing the crew of the *Argos* in a blinding glare. Shueman brought his hands up to his eyes, squinting against the light.

"Can't we dim the lights a little?" he asked.

"Sorry, Commander," Jack Wright answered from somewhere on the other side of the lights. "We need the illumination for the television cameras. Just bear with us for a while. I trust you all feel a little more rested."

"There's no doubt it's good to be back on the surface," Shueman volunteered uneasily. "But we still have some obvious questions as to the need for all these isolation procedures. You guys have promised us some answers. . . ."

"And you'll have them, Commander. But first we need to ask a few questions of your medical officer." Wright paused, and Shueman thought he could detect the movement of shadowy figures beyond the lights. "I'd like to introduce Dr. Anatoly Sukhov of the Soviet Institute of Space Medicine. Dr. Sukhov is an expert in the contagion we believe that you've contracted."

There was another pause before a second voice issued from the loudspeaker, its Russian accent thickened by the static.

"Good day, Commander," said the unseen Sukhov.

Shueman leaned back slightly, arching a questioning eyebrow in the direction of his medical officer, and watching as she shrugged her lack of recognition. Whoever he was, Dr. Sukhov was another of the surprises that Shueman was growing to hate with each passing minute.

"My questions will be directed primarily at Dr. Lakehurst," Sukhov continued. "However, I would appreciate input from any of the crew where appropriate. Is that understood?"

"I'm sure you'll have full coopera-

tion," Wright intruded again.

"Dr. Lakehurst," Sukhov began. "We have copies of all medical test reports that you transmitted. Can you verify that these are all the tests that were conducted during the mission?"

"Of course," Christine frowned impatiently. "All procedures prescribed by the mission medical plan were conducted on schedule and in their entirety. This included blood samples, urinalysis, and upper respiratory cultures. I think my reports document the fact that this crew has been extraordinarily healthy, despite exposure to the Martian surface." She paused, shaking her head into the glare."Based on these facts, I see no medical basis for evidence of biological contamination of anyone on this crew."

"I see," Sukhov replied without emotion. "But your reports make little mention of medical problems prior to the landing on Mars."

Christine stared at Shueman in open confusion, shaking her head slowly before she turned back toward the bank of lights beyond the Plexiglas.

"I don't understand your question, Dr. Sukhov," she said. "Are you saying that the contamination occurred *before* the landing on Mars?"

The loudspeaker answered only with an empty hiss, and Shueman came quickly to his feet and crossed the room, pressing his face close to the Plexiglas.

"Jack," he said forcefully. "I want the answer to that last question. What kind of contamination are we talking about?"

"We need you to run some more tests," Wright said quietly. "Blood, urine, the works. I think the laboratory facilities in there will be sufficient. We're looking for anything out of the ordinary, particularly in the way of antibodies. Do you understand?"

"No, damn it," Shueman thundered in return. "And you're still talking in riddles. We deserve some straight answers, Jack. Do you hear me?"

The world beyond the light remained silent for a few maddening heartbeats, and when the answer finally came, Wright's voice bore a tone of genuine regret.

"We need the data, Warren. As soon as possible. Call it a double-blind; call it a goddamned nuisance. But it's the only way home. You must believe that. We've scheduled another briefing for 1800 tomorrow. That gives you almost twenty-four hours to begin your work. Good luck."

The spotlights flickered, and the wall began to close at the same time, forcing Shueman to step back. He turned to face his crew, finding them all a mirror of his own anger and confusion. All except for Robertson.

The navigator sat with his eyes closed, as if he were still protecting them from the glare of the spotlights. But his face was free of lines of fear

and doubt that had become a permanent mask for the others. In their place was another emotion, and while Shueman couldn't quite give it a name, a primeval chord of tribal ritual was touched somewhere deep inside. In a moment he recognized what the rest of the crew did not: that their journey into the nightmare would require a different kind of leadership than a ride to Mars.

The darkened room was busy with the rustle of shadows, but Jack Wright paid them no mind as he watched the one shadow seated next to him. Finally there came a graveled cough, and Sukhov shifted in his seat.

"Satisfied?" Wright asked sharply. "I told you we had nothing to hide."

Sukhov rose slowly in the darkness, and Wright could feel the Russian's eyes burrowing down on the top of his head.

"At least not yet," Sukhov said evenly. He wavered for a moment, and several other shadows stepped quickly forward to steady him.

"Do you still wish to proceed?" Wright asked reluctantly. "If it were my decision, I'd allow a little more time. . . ."

Sukhov coughed again, cutting the American short.

"If it were *my* decision," the Russian began slowly, "I would kill them now, while it's still easy." He paused, studying the shadow in front of him. "But it's not my decision, any more than it's yours. And therefore, we will *both* do as we have been ordered. . . ."

Shueman watched as the needle found the vein on the inside of his elbow, and the syringe began to fill with his blood.

"It doesn't make any sense, Commander," Christine was saying as she finished drawing the sample. She pressed a piece of cotton in the crook of Shueman's elbow and motioned for someone else to take his place on the examining table. "I spent two years studying the literature on biological contamination before this mission. I *know* the most probable mechanisms, the likely sources, and the expected first symptoms. I *know* what to look for, even without the guidelines established by NASA. And I don't need some damned Russian telling me my job. None of us has shown anything even remotely suspicious."

Shueman nodded, holding his arm flexed as Duvall jumped up and took his place.

"Let bygones be bygones," Duvall quipped uneasily as Lakehurst turned toward him with a fresh syringe in hand. "I never really doubted you, Christine. Honestly. . . ."

Christine jabbed the needle home with the flicker of a smile, enjoying the grimace of pain that swept across Duvall's face.

"Are you absolutely sure, Chris-

tine?" Shueman leaned against one of the shining supply cabinets, staring down at the white floor. "What if the symptoms aren't obvious? What if they're afraid of us as carriers, rather than as victims? Is that possible?"

Christine grunted reluctantly as she pulled the needle from Duvall's arm. "Anything is possible, I suppose. But why would they have waited to tell us anything until we were in Earth orbit? Why would it have to be such a last-minute surprise?"

"But it wasn't," Dana said quietly. She darted a glance around the room, settling finally on Robertson, who stood in the doorway. "Kern had been expecting something to go wrong for a long time. I've been telling him he's crazy, but he's not." She leaned back toward the commander, her eyes wide with disbelief. "He's been right all along."

Shueman frowned past Dana, but there was no surprise in his voice as he asked, "What's she talking about, Kern?"

"Yes, Kern," Duvall chimed in harshly. "Tell us."

Robertson felt Dana's hand slide into his own, squeezing tight as she looked for some reassurance. He smiled at her briefly before he held up an open hand and backed into the hallway, motioning for the others to follow.

He waited for them in the corridor, a few steps from the beginning of the living room. They gathered around him with a common expression of puzzlement, and Christine still carried the blood sample she was in the midst of taking from Duvall.

"All right, Kern," Shueman nodded. "I don't know what you've got, but let us have it. And you can begin by telling us why we're talking out here."

"Privacy, Commander." Robertson swept his gaze quickly around. "I did some scouting, and this seems to be the one spot in the entire quarters that isn't covered by the surveillance cameras. An oversight, I guess."

Shueman followed Robertson's gaze, and, true to his word, not a camera was in sight.

"All right," he nodded, a little less skeptical. "But what do you have to say that shouldn't be overheard? We're all on the same side, aren't we?"

Robertson frowned and shook his head.

"Maybe not, Commander," he said. "As of a few minutes ago, we're taking orders from a Russian. And since our arrival we've been prisoners, isolated from the outside world, even to the point of radio and television."

"The *television*," Christine whispered sharply, suddenly discovering what Robertson had noted in his first moments in the living room. "There *was* supposed to be a television out there. But why would they have taken that?"

Robertson heard the question, but

he only shook his head and turned back toward the commander.

"Dana said you've been expecting something to happen for a long time," Shueman said. "Just how long?"

Robertson drew a deep breath.

"A year," he said. "I suppose it started just after we left Martian orbit. Little things at first. If you recall, I was spending a lot of time verifying our navigational plots, and that meant a lot of interface with the computer teams in Houston. It seemed to me that they were suddenly getting sloppy with the data they were sending us."

Duvall shifted impatiently. "Or maybe *you* were just getting screwy."

"Maybe . . . ," Robertson acknowledged without emotion. "But then there's the birthday greeting."

"What the hell . . . ," Duvall chafed before the commander silenced him with an upraised hand.

"I got a birthday message from my family," Robertson explained. "Just the routine well-wishes on my personal message file. Except . . . it was signed by my mother, my father, and my sister." He paused long enough for everyone to ask the same silent question. "My sister died in an automobile accident just before the mission started."

Shueman's frown deepened. "And your assessment?"

"That was a sloppy piece of counterfeiting, Commander. Somebody knew that I'd be expecting a birthday greeting among my messages, but they were using data from an old personal file."

"This is ridiculous, Commander!" Duvall thundered suddenly. "Why in God's name would NASA be sending us faked personal messages? I think our navigator has gone paranoid. . . ."

"Perhaps I have," Robertson nodded, fixing Duvall with a cold stare. "But perhaps we all have reason to be paranoid. Consider the question . . . What if we're not sick? What if we're merely prisoners?"

Christine edged up next to Duvall.

"But why, Kern?" she asked. "Why should they make us prisoners if we're not really contaminated?"

Robertson stared back at them all, his voice hardening with certainty.

"Because they're afraid," he said simply. "And if we plan to stay alive, we've got to find out why. . . ."

Robertson stirred from a light sleep at the sound of the door. Dana stood naked in the middle of the bright rectangle pushing in from the corridor, a slender ghost shimmering under the glow of the artificial light.

"Kern," she called softly. "Are you awake?"

"Always," Robertson answered from the bed. "Come in and close the door."

Dana stepped across the threshold and tapped the plate on the wall, summoning the twin slabs of metal from their hiding places. When the

door was closed, Robertson switched on the lights of the bedroom, suppressing a smile as Dana shivered by the door.

"How you got all the way to Mars and back without freezing, I'll never know," he said, patting the bed beside him. "You're the most cold-blooded astronaut I've ever known."

Dana slid under the covers beside him, huddling close as she let her body shiver out the momentary chill.

"I'm scared," she said, the words muffled as she buried her face against his shoulder. "I'm scared that everything you said tonight is true, Kern. And if they're so afraid, what will stop them from just. . . ." She pulled her face away to meet his eyes. "From just getting rid of us? Isn't that what they plan to do? Isn't that why they want to keep our presence a secret from the rest of the world?"

Robertson shifted on the bed to wrap an arm around the woman's shoulder. Suddenly the smooth skin of her body was sliding over him like a cloak of silk. Her breath was strong in his ear, and he was glad she couldn't see the frown on his own face.

He stroked the avalanche of hair that flowed across her bare back, willing the lie to find the proper life in his voice.

"I could still be wrong, Dana. . . ."

She looked up at him, taking only a moment to read the lie in his eyes. Even so, she accepted it for the temporary comfort it offered, nodding once.

"Make love to me," she said, pulling the smile from the memories of happier times.

Robertson smiled back at her, helpless in the warmth that she was creating so easily. He suddenly rolled out of bed and padded to the far corner of the room where the security camera peered down from the ceiling. He picked up the chair that sat in front of the barren desk, raising it over his head.

"Kern!" Dana whispered as she watched him smash the camera down from its perch.

"Let them come in here and fix it if they want," he said, laughing loudly as he bounded back to the bed. "But somehow, I don't think we'll be disturbed. . . ."

She rose up to meet him, her mouth finding his to put an end to the words.

He left the dreams reluctantly, a part of him sensing the illusion, but still unwilling to face the reality that awaited with consciousness. They were dreams of his first years in the space program, when everything had still been cast in the simple colors of youth, and destiny, and glorious challenges. The night sky had been a coat of arms, the great machines nothing more than the shining weapons of the quest; and they had each been the

heroes he had painted for Dana in the night just past.

And now when he opened his eyes, the dreams of glory would be bounded by four lifeless walls.

He reached for Dana, finally risking a glimpse of reality when he found only an empty bed. The clock on the nightstand read 7:33, but the windowless room was still immersed in the artificial night of isolation. Robertson fumbled for the switch on the wall over the bed, squinting against the sudden rush of light.

Dana had indeed gone sometime during the night, and he found himself wishing she had stayed. Perhaps decorum still had a place, though he doubted it as he surveyed the broken remains of the camera that littered the carpet.

Robertson rolled out of bed, his knees buckling slightly as they learned to anticipate the sudden resistance of gravity. He pulled on the nylon bodysuit and walked to the door, reaching out to tap the release switch.

The metal panels seemed to buzz for a moment, but in the end they ignored his request and remained firmly in place. Robertson hit the switch again and again, each time with more force as he began to suspect the worst.

If the entire isolation facility could be made so easily into a prison, then why hadn't he seen how readily each room could become a cell? He cursed his stupidity as he stared at the door and prayed.

At precisely five minutes to eleven, the doors slid open without a warning, sending Robertson sprawling into the corridor. He quickly found himself facing Shueman, Lakehurst, Thorn, and Duvall, each of whom erupted in a simultaneous flurry of angry questions.

"Damn it, what was *that* all about?" Duvall was bellowing from down the corridor.

But Robertson ignored the swell of useless questions as he stared at the open door to Dana's room. He stood in dread for another few seconds, silently offering his soul to the devil in exchange for her appearance. When the doorway remained empty, he took the few, reluctant steps across the threshold.

Please be sleeping, Dana. Please. . . .

But her bed was as empty as his had been that morning. Robertson moved slowly through the bedroom and the bathroom, searching for some recent sign of her presence. By the time he returned to the corridor, he was sick with the certainty of his understanding. They had made their mistake; Dana had not been chosen at random. And he knew the secret that had made her expendable.

"Commander." Robertson's voice was weak, as if it came suddenly from a great distance. "Dana's gone. . . ."

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"I understand your concern." Jack Wright's voice came evasively from the intercom. "There was a problem, Warren. One of the medical complications that we had feared. Dana Clarke developed the first symptoms last night, and we thought it best to separate her from the rest of you. Just a precaution."

"A precaution," Shueman repeated, his eyes narrowing for a moment as he glanced over at Robertson.

Robertson met the commander's gaze for an instant, shaking his head with a motion that would be imperceptable to anyone sitting on the other side of the wall of Plexiglas.

"Can you give us some information on her condition?" Shueman continued evenly.

"We're doing what we can," Wright replied. "I've got nothing more detailed than that right now. I suggest that you get on with your own work in there, and we'll keep you informed."

"Very well," Shueman nodded. "And Jack. . . ."

"Still here, Warren."

"We'd like to know when we can have some direct communication with our families." Shueman made the words sound hopeful.

And perhaps some part of him did still believe, until the static rose from the intercom, and there came the sound of muffled whispers in the instant before the switch was thrown.

Jack Wright's voice came suddenly from the intercom.

"Just a little longer, Warren. That's all . . . just a little longer. . . ."

But in that moment, Shueman knew that his navigator was right. None of them had families and friends awaiting their return, and they were alone in a world gone mad. . . .

Shueman led the way into Robertson's room, nodding once at the broken remains of the surveillance camera. From behind there came the groan of metal as Duvall wedged the metal equipment rack into the doorway.

"Let the bastards try and lock us in now," Duvall grinned as he followed the others into the room.

"Why are they lying to us?" Christine pleaded, crumpling onto the edge of the bed. "And what would they want with Dana?"

She buried her face in her hands, sobbing quietly even after Andra Thorn sat down next to her and put an arm around her shoulder.

There was a moment of hesitation, and then Robertson felt the combined stare of the others focus on him. The weight of authority settled on his shoulders, and then he felt the first, faint stirrings of power.

"Dana was expendable," he said softly, as if that might take the edge off the truth.

"Expendable . . . ?" Shueman repeated in disbelief.

"From the standpoint of our value to our captors," Robertson continued.

"She told me about it one night early in the mission . . . when I was worrying about birth control. She told me that she could never have children."

"Dana was sterile?" Christine looked up with watery eyes. "My God, Kern. Even if it's true, what difference does it make?"

Robertson turned back toward Shueman, watching the emotions play across his face.

"It makes a lot of difference," Shueman said quietly, holding the navigator's gaze. "Especially if it's the rest of the world that's contaminated, instead of us. The question becomes . . . What do we do next?"

Robertson swept his gaze around the room, waiting for them all to offer some sign of understanding.

And then he said simply, "We escape."

"Escape?" Duvall echoed. "Are you crazy? If what you've said is true, then we're sitting in the only safe place on the planet. Why would we try and leave?"

Robertson answered quickly. "To save our lives. Our captors are already afraid of us, Duvall. We're being held here for their safety . . . not for ours."

"But the contamination . . . ," Duvall protested with fading resolve.

"It doesn't matter anymore," Robertson said evenly. "I'm sure Christine can give you the details better than I can. But this isolation facility was designed to keep some new contagion bottled up, not to keep something out there from getting in."

Christine straightened and nodded slowly.

"He's right," she said. "This is a negative pressure facility. It was intended to isolate the crews and anything they might have brought back from Mars. But it wasn't intended to provide biological isolation from organisms that already exist in the human environment."

"In other words. . . ." Duvall frowned as he moved into the center of the room. "If it's the rest of the world that's sick, then we're already contaminated."

Robertson followed him into the middle of the group and said, "Maybe. That's something we can't afford to worry about now. All that matters to us is that we find a way out of here, before we all become as expendable as Dana."

Andra stirred on the bed, shaking her head quickly.

"Everything makes sense except for that, Kern. The contamination . . . the need for biologically reproductive specimens . . . maybe even the lies. But why are they so afraid of us? If we're supposed to play at Adam and Eve, why not just tell us the truth and get on with it?"

Robertson considered the question as he stared down at the floor, wondering how much of his own premonition he should put into words. In the end he merely shook his head.

"We'll know the truth as soon as we get out of here," he said finally. "Let's do this one step at a time."

"Very well, Navigator," Shueman said grudgingly. "But that first step is going to be a tough one. There's only one door to this place, and in case you hadn't noticed, there weren't any controls for its operation on the inside."

Robertson smiled stiffly and said, "I've noticed. But I've also noticed that no one outside these walls seems to have been terribly prepared for anything that's happened. I think they're improvising as much as we are, and if that's true, perhaps they haven't remembered to cover all their tracks." He paused and turned to fix Andra with an expectant stare before he added, "Especially those that might have been left on the computers. . . ."

Andra suddenly blossomed into a smile as she caught his train of thought.

"Of course, Kern," she said quickly. "The isolation facility is controlled by the main computers here at Kennedy. That would include supervision of security and access. If we could tap into those computers and do a little hacking. . . ."

"Exactly," Robertson nodded. "And while Andra is working on that, the rest of us have got to make preparations for the escape."

Duvall grunted as he started for the doorway.

"Well, I know one way to start," he growled. "I'm going to break every one of their damned cameras. . . ."

"No!"

Duvall turned in surprise at the order from Robertson. He cast a brief glance at Shueman, and then shrugged in confusion.

"No," Robertson repeated more gently. "We must maintain the illusion of cooperation, right up to the last moment. . . ."

Andra broke the simple code in the early hours of the next invisible dawn.

"Got them!" she squealed in almost childish delight. "Look at this, Kern. These security codes haven't been touched since the facility was built. I'll bet no one had reviewed these programs since we left for Mars."

Robertson was on his feet in a moment, shedding the half-sleep as he nodded at the matrix of numbers on the computer screen.

"Are you sure you've hidden your hacking from anyone who might be watching?" he asked from the doorway.

"I'm sure," Andra answered icily. "As far as those bastards are concerned, I'm busy running blood statistics for Christine."

"And how about the alarms when we open the door?"

"Already discontected," Andra

smiled. "We won't make a sound, Kern. Let's just hope there's nobody standing guard out there at four in the morning."

"All right," Robertson said with a deep breath. "I'll wake the others. Set a timing program for five minutes, and get yourself ready to go. . . ."

They stood in the corridor, staring at their dim reflections in the polished door. Robertson was the last to arrive, a toolbox in one hand and three short pieces of metal pipe in the other.

"Basic tools," he said as he passed the box to Andra. "Did you pack some medical supplies, Christine?"

"Got 'em," Christine nodded, hefting the medical bag on her shoulder.

"And what are these?" Shueman asked as he accepted one of the pieces of pipe from Robertson.

"Weapons," the navigator answered, passing the third to Duvall. "Until we find something a little more modern."

Shueman shifted the pipe uncomfortably, clenching his fist tight enough to whiten the knuckles.

"Do you really think this will be necessary?" he asked quietly, staring up at Robertson.

"I don't know," Robertson answered, glancing down at his watch. "How long, Andra?"

"Thirty seconds," she whispered.

"All right." Robertson looked around the group, gauging the levels of fear in each pair of eyes. "Our first objective is to get ourselves off the base. If we can find some transportation to make it easier, great. But we might have to do it all on foot, so be ready to move and keep moving. Understand?"

"Hell no," Duvall returned, smiling wanly in the darkness.

With that, the mechanisms buried in the door began to rustle with the sound of shifting metal. Robertson tightened his grip on the pipe in his hand, stepping closer to the door.

"Commander," he said softly. "You take the right side. I'll take the left. Duvall . . . you've got anybody else."

"Thanks," Duvall piped as he moved up behind Robertson.

The door opened with a rush of air, and suddenly they were surrounded by the smell of earth and ocean.

Robertson charged through the open doorway into the darkness beyond, with Shueman and Duvall following on his heels. A moment later they were all standing in the cavernous gloom of the garage that adjoined the isolation facility. A short distance away, the transfer van gleamed white in the shadows, but there was no other sign of activity.

Andra's timing program ran its course, and the door groaned again behind them, shutting with the finality of a tomb. Robertson was already halfway across the garage, moving quickly toward the doors that were open

to the early morning.

He had come to a halt on the threshold of the world when the others came up around him.

"Robertson . . . ," Shueman began before the navigator silenced him with an upraised hand.

"Listen," Robertson whispered, canting his own head into the breeze.

Shueman strained in the silence for a moment, glancing over his shoulder toward the others.

"I don't hear anything," the commander said at last.

"Exactly," Robertson nodded. "When do you ever remember Kennedy being so quiet? There's not a sound out there . . . and there aren't any lights. . . ."

Shueman frowned as he searched the predawn twilight with a new urgency. To the north the huge bulk of the Vehicle Assembly Building was a monolith against the sky. Farther east were the launch pads themselves, but their towers were still lost in the darkness. Nowhere on the horizon was a light to be found, and Shueman found himself staring once again at the navigator.

"What does it mean?" the commander asked quietly.

But it was another voice that answered his question.

"It means that night has fallen," Jack Wright said, and with his words came the beams of a dozen flashlights. "Perhaps it has fallen forever. . . ."

• • •

Robertson squinted past his hands into the glare of the surrounding lights. The sound of shuffling footsteps encircled them, and when Jack Wright spoke again, his words came from barely an arm's length away.

"It was you, wasn't it, Navigator?" he accused with a trace of admiration. "I told them a long time ago it would be you. The psychological profiles never lie. But they wouldn't listen."

"It doesn't matter now," Sukhov said harshly from deeper in the darkness. "Our point is proved. The experiment is ended."

"Experiment?" Shueman took a step toward the voice, and suddenly there came the ominous clatter of automatic weapons being readied. "Jack, what the hell is going on here? We've played your game long enough. . . ."

Jack Wright cut him short with a laugh that disappeared quickly on the ocean breeze.

"This isn't a game, Commander," Wright said. "You wouldn't be standing out here now if that's what you believed."

Shueman peered into the glare, trying to focus on the vague outline of Wright.

"Maybe we don't know what to believe," he said, but his words sounded lame and uncertain, as if they were merely buying time. And then he realized that he *was* buying time, waiting with all the others for Robertson to break the silence. In that moment, Shueman realized that

the navigator had become the leader of their expedition.

Robertson stared into the lights for a little while longer, waiting for this last acknowledgment of his authority to register with each of the crew. Perhaps it would mean nothing, of course. Or perhaps it would mean much more than even he would ever know.

"When did it begin?" the navigator asked finally, without a trace of surprise in his voice.

"When did it begin?" Jack Wright coughed quietly as he searched his own memories. "We'll probably never know. The first strains of the virus were identified six months after the *Argos* left Earth orbit. We believe it was a mutation of the human T-lymphotropic viruses that caused such a scare a few years ago. But there wasn't time for the necessary lab research. By the time the first cases were documented in New Delhi, the whole world was already infected. Within another two weeks it was all over."

Christine reached out to touch Robertson on the arm, shaking her head in confusion as she struggled to believe.

"Then it's the truth," she said, shifting her gaze out into the glare of the surrounding lights. "It's the world that's infected. But surely there must have been time to do *some* research. Even a variant of the AIDS virus couldn't kill that quickly."

Jack Wright made a sound like laughter, but it passed too quickly for any of them to be certain.

"In that, you're right, Dr. Lakehurst," he said softly. "This is a disease that kills through famine, and cold . . . and suicide. It kills by turning all the technological trappings of human civilization into worthless garbage. As we stand here now, more than 4 billion of those who were alive when you left for Mars are dead."

"Four billion. . . ." Christine closed her eyes.

"But that still leaves 2 billion alive," Shueman added desperately. "Why didn't somebody do some research? You've had two damn years. . . ."

"No, Commander," Wright corrected evenly. "I've already told you. We had less than a month. After that the disease had already won."

"But *how*?" Christine sobbed in anger. "If the disease doesn't kill outright, how can it force more than 4 billion people to starve?"

At that, Wright moved forward between two beams of light. Robertson blinked in surprise as he tried to reconcile his memories with the apparition that hunched into view. The long hair flowed in unwashed layers over the narrow shoulders, and the once husky body had become a gaunt frame that seemed lost beneath the layers of dirty, unkempt clothing. The crew of the *Argos* stepped backward in unison, cringing together as Wright joined them in the circle of light.

Wright lowered his gaze for a moment, as if gathering strength to face the revulsion in their eyes.

"Do you understand?" he asked at last. "This is a disease that kills by finding the one common denominator in all the creations of man, and rendering it useless." He raised his arms slowly into view, letting the layers of ragged clothing fall away.

"Oh my God," Christine whispered as the truth blossomed in rotting glory. Jack Wright's hands had been transformed into a pair of swollen, arthritic claws.

"This symptom is common to everyone?" Robertson asked quietly, clenching his own hands instinctively.

"Everyone," Wright nodded, lowering his hands from view. "Even the unborn. It seems to be a rapid form of arthritis. It affects all of the joints, but the hands suffer the worst of the deformation."

"Except for the crew of the *Argos*," Robertson added thoughtfully. "Do you have any reason for that?"

Wright shook his head slowly.

"Only speculation, Navigator. As Dr. Lakehurst can confirm, the T-lymphotropic virus was known to have an extraordinary high rate of mutation. That was the key difficulty in finding a treatment for the original outbreak. Our Russian friends believe that by 1995 everyone on the planet had been exposed to the virus to some degree. If the mutation cycle had somehow continued on the same track inside of every living man and woman. . . ."

"But that would be unprecedented," Christine intruded suddenly. "A mutation cycle operating independently inside of 6 billion host organisms, and then arriving at the same evolutionary point within a few months' time. . . ."

Jack Wright met her gaze of disbelief with one of doomed resignation.

"Yes, it would be unprecedented, Dr. Lakehurst," he said mockingly. "But then, who is ever surprised by the expected?"

"But how would it explain our lack of symptoms?" Robertson pressed, glancing from Wright to Christine and back again.

"Zero gravity," Wright said. "It's the only common denominator that separates the crew of the *Argos* from the rest of humanity. As for the exact bilogic mechanism, that is a matter for research . . . and no one except for the five of you can still hold a test tube."

"Six," Robertson corrected briskly. "Which brings us to the final question: What have you done with Dana?"

"Enough," said Sukhov from the darkness. The Russian stepped into the outer circle of reflected light, close enough to become a close copy of the crooked image of Jack Wright. Across his shoulders hung the stained remnants of a military uniform whose

red stars still gleamed like angry eyes. "The time for talk is ended. There is no longer any purpose to be served by delaying the inevitable."

But Wright held Robertson's gaze, answering evenly. "She was used to purchase *time*, Navigator. A concession to our Russian friends, who were afraid we might hoard the last six pairs of hands left to the human race."

"I said, enough!" Sukhov choked in rising anger.

"Time for what?" Robertson asked quickly.

"Time to be certain that you were healthy," Wright answered, hurrying the pace of his words. "Time to be certain you might still breed and produce normal offspring."

"*Enough*!" Sukhov demanded again, and this time his order was underscored with a gunshot that crackled through the humid air. The gun was held against his twisted palm with a length of knotted cord, while a short stub of metal allowed the trigger to be pulled with his other hand. "The agreement has already been reached. Our governments have decided the issue. We are here merely to carry out the final act. I suggest it be done quickly and without further delay."

"What does he mean?" Christine asked in a whisper.

"He means they're going to kill us," Robertson answered, never moving his gaze from the Russian.

"But why?" Christine pleaded. "If what they've said is true, then we're all that's left. They *need* us. . . ."

"No, Dr. Lakehurst," the Russian said, still holding the gun out in front of him. "The order of humanity has changed. There is no longer a place for the likes of you."

Duvall surged forward, jostling Robertson to one side as he faced Sukhov. "We're normal, damn you. You're the monsters here, not us."

The Russian leveled the gun on Duvall's chest, but he allowed himself the pleasure of a smile before he answered, "Perhaps that is the truth, but it does not change what must be done. It is the law of evolution, survival of the fittest."

Robertson raised a hand to Duvall's shoulder, pulling him slowly back from the nuzzle of Sukhov's gun.

"Better to rule in hell . . . ," the navigator said softly.

"Precisely," Sukhov nodded. "You have come back to us as gods, Navigator. What we do now, we do to save ourselves."

Sukhov began to move slowly backward. Robertson turned toward Wright, who searched his face for a long moment before he retreated with the Russian. From beyond the ring of lights, there came the whisper of metal, and Robertson felt the rage of frustration welling up from his stomach.

But it was not for himself that he raged, or the life he was about to lose at the hands of the faceless men who

shuffled beyond the lights. It was for all the dreams that would die unborn; it was for Dana.

The volley of gunfire came like a sudden thunder. Robertson felt his knees buckle reflexively, and the hard pavement rose up to meet him. He felt the others fall around him, and then he waited for the pain; the warm flow of his own blood.

But there was no pain. Only the rapid drumbeat of his own heart, and then Jack Wright's voice coming from the shadows.

"You can get up now, Navigator. The Russians are dead."

Robertson looked up in surprise as Wright stepped carefully around the crumpled shape of Sukhov.

"But you must leave quickly," Wright continued, staring down at Robertson. "I brought with me the few men that I could trust. There are many more who believe what Sukhov said. Many more willing to buy their own security with your deaths."

Robertson came to his feet, watching as the other crew members slowly followed suit.

"Where did they take Dana?" Robertson asked quickly.

"South to Miami," Wright answered. "The Russians have a ship waiting there. You might still catch her if you travel fast. There's a truck outside. I've loaded it with food, weapons, and anything else I could manage. Take it through gate number three. No one will stop you, but after that, you're on your own."

Robertson nodded once, and the others hurried past into the first gray light of morning. A few moments later there came the throaty roar of a truck, and Duvall's voice climbing above the noise.

"Come on, Navigator. Before the sunrise makes us an easy target."

Robertson hesitated a moment longer, resisting the instinctive impulse to offer his hand to Wright.

"Come with us," he said finally. "We could use the help."

"No," Wright shook his head reluctantly. "We are of a different species, Navigator. A different world. Sukhov was right, you know. The gods have arrived, and I'm not sure I want to live to see what happens now."

Robertson frowned and turned away, hurrying out to the waiting truck. Duvall gunned the engine as soon as the navigator had climbed aboard, and they lurched into motion.

The eastern horizon was already blazing with the first light of sunrise as they sped across the causeway toward the mainland. Robertson closed his eyes to the morning wind. In that instant he felt the frightened stirring of 2 billion souls, and he glimpsed the clean pages of history that would be written in their blood.

Sukhov had been right: the gods *had* arrived.

But for a final moment, the future

still slept in the last shadows of night that hid the mainland. The navigator filled his lungs with the smell of the ocean, and allowed himself the smile of a conquerer.



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REPORT ON COMPETITION 43

PROOFREADER'S HOLIDAY: The proofreader had gone on vacation and a number of science fiction and fantasy titles had been altered by the change of a single letter. You were asked to give the new title and a summary of the new plot. We were inundated by responses, many of which were duplicates. Some of the repeat titles were: I, GOBOT; STRANGER IN A STRANGE BAND; THE PESTMAN; LUCIFER'S HAMPER; THE ANDROMEDA SPRAIN. The winners:

FIRST PRIZE

CALL HIM LARD (His close friends just call him San Diego Lightfoot Suet).

GOOF NEWS FROM THE VATICAN (The Pope discovers that he is not, after all, infallible).

BORN WITH THE DAD (Genetic manipulation transforms human reproductive methods).

THE FOREVER WART (It came, as though transported from another universe: a thing even Compound W could not conquer . . .).

DANDELION WHINE (Everywhere he went, he could hear their annoying vegetable whimperings. . .).

Lee Crawley
Eugene, OR

SECOND PRIZE

THE CAT WHO WALKS THROUGH WILLS (Pixel wasn't just a sentient cat; he was the best testate lawyer in six universes!).

THE ARMAGEDDON RUG (The world of today is threatened by an ancient evil, whose source is a macramé artifact from the sixties).

ALL MY SUNS REMEMBERED (The memoirs of the Supreme Being regarding his greatest accomplishment, the Cosmos).

MEDIA: HARLAN'S WORLD (Harlan is trapped on a strange planet whose inhabitants confuse reality with pictures that move at sixteen frames per second).

Joe Rico
Taunton, MA

RUNNERS UP

SOMETHING WICKED THIS WAY COMBS (The students at a barber college are possessed by hellish demons with a taste for Butch Wax — and no style sense at all!).

MAROONED IN MEALTIME (Chuck leaned across the table to pass the yams and slipped into a time loop, and now here come the yams again — and again — and again . . .).

THE MIRROR OF HEP DREAMS (Something was wrong with Judy's mirror — could her reflection actually be wearing a *zoot suit*?).

Jeff Grimshaw
Milford, NJ

ENDER'S GAYE (Interstellar hero has a dark personal secret).

BLOCK DESTROYER (When a Venusian family moves in down the

street . . . There Goes the Neighborhood!).

S. Hamm
San Francisco, CA

HONORABLE MENTIONS

THE BOOK OF THE GUN COW (Ole Bessie's had enough and she's not going to take it anymore).

Ken Zauter/Sophia Canavos
Syracuse, NY

CAST OF AMONTILLATO (Who's who behind the brick wall).

Darienne T. Franks
Westfield, NJ

PEP SEMATARY (A chilling story about a cheerleader's return from the dead).

Joyce A. Cowan
Springfield, OR

SCHIMMELHORN'S GELD (Papa Schimmelhorn's sexual exploits are ended at last).

Robert Coulson
Hartford City, IN

THE DAERIE QUEENE (Trials of a medieval milk store).

Randi Cohen
Flushing, NY

THE TOME MACHINE (How-to book by Isaac Asimov on using one to increase one's literary output).

Paul Rose
Montrose, CO

GRAIL OF CTHULHU (Parsifal's quest leads him to a horror from beyond the stars!).

Michael D. Toman
Torrance, CA

COMPETITION 44 (suggested by Timothy W. Bartel)

THE F & SF LEXICON: Coin a term that is based upon one or more names of an SF or fantasy luminary, and provide a definition of this term that is fitting to its eponym. You may use first or last names, and you may corrupt them, but be sure your eponym is readily recognizable. Examples:

GERNS-BACKWATER, *n*, a science fiction pulp magazine. "'Ralph 124C41+: A Romance of the Year 2660' first appeared in a Gerns-backwater entitled *Modern Electronics*."

LONGYEAR, *n*, the amount of subjective time it takes to read *Enemy Mine* in its entirety.

Please limit yourself to 10 entries.

Rules: Send entries to Competition Editor, F&SF, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Entries must be received by Sept. 15. Judges are the editors of F&SF; their decision is final. All entries become the property of F&SF; none can be returned.

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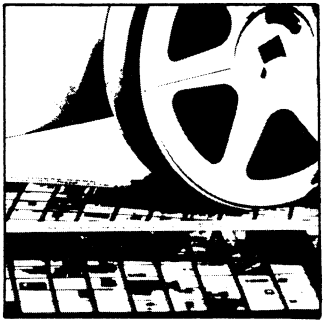
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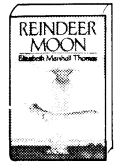
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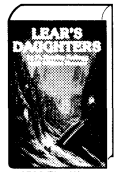
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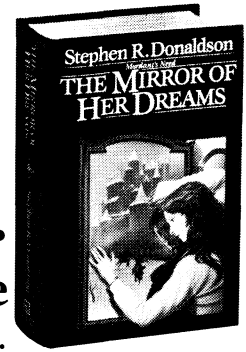
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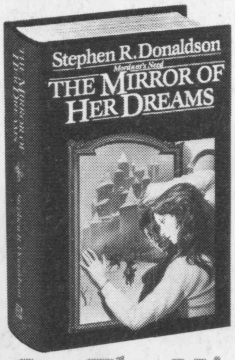
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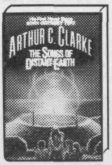
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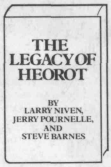


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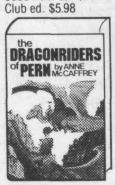
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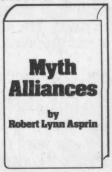
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